# IMMORTAL SISTERS

## SECRETS OF TAOIST WOMEN

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
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# IMMORTAL SISTERS

# TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Among the images of Asian society most familiar to the average Westerner is that of the subservient role of women. Enforced weakness of woman in society is not, of course peculiar to Asia, or to past times; and indeed the globalization of awareness of this fact has figured prominently in modern attempts by East and West to understand and interact with one another.

In East Asia, the systematic suppression of women is apparently due in the main to the influence of state Confucianism, a conservative ideology that has dominated the Chinese body politic for twenty-two centuries. In this context, state Confucianism means the official perversion of the teachings of the ancient philosopher Confucius (ca. 500 B.C.E.), which was instituted centuries after his death and was traditionally bent on keeping political power in the hands of a male elite embracing fixed ideas. To this end it attempted to suppress free thinking, imagination, social change, and inklings of the spiritual side of humanity.

In stark contrast to this is the more ancient tradition of Taoism, a far more comprehensive way of life and thought in which the importance of the feminine element in human life is strongly emphasized, and which mythically and historically counts very many women among its greatest figures. The present volume is an account of the teachings of some of the outstanding women of knowledge enshrined in this most ancient of scientific traditions, illustrating the inner processes by which they cultivated their unusual wisdom and power.

The prominence of the feminine in Taoism, both literally and symbolically, is sometimes explained by the great antiquity of Taoism, with roots in ancient society prior to the establishment of patriarchy as a dominant organizational pattern. Whatever the truth of this may be, the importance of females and feminine associations in Taoist lore has transcended the influence of social structure throughout the ages.

As is well known, symbols such as the Mysterious Female and Mother Earth are fundamental to Taoism, representing essential pragmatic aspects of the teaching. Furthermore, while the practicalities symbolized by the Mysterious Female and Mother Earth are regarded as indispensable for all practitioners, regardless of gender, women are said to have a particular talent for them. Therefore it was considered especially easy for women to attain the essence of Taoism even under the rigorous conditions of patriarchal society.

Taoism is sometimes called the Huang-Lao Teaching, after the names of two of its major figureheads, the "Yellow Emperor," Huang Di and the "Old Master," Lao-tzu. Both of these names are well known in the West, the former through the Yellow Emperor's *Classic of Internal Medicine* and the latter through *The Way and Its Power (Tao-te Ching),* translated into English dozens of times as one of the main sourcebooks of Taoism. Less well publicized is the fact that both of these men are represented in Taoist lore as having had female teachers.

The Yellow Emperor is generally thought of as having lived in the mid-third millennium B.C.E. He is said to have learned medicine and life extension from two male teachers, and to have learned sexology and magic from two female teachers. All of these sciences became part of the complex body of Taoist knowledge, and were elaborated to play extremely important roles in Chinese life and history.

The record of contributions of women to Chinese civilization goes back even further than Huang Di, however, to the legend of a certain female tribal leader of high antiquity who is said to have "patched the sky with five-colored stones" at some remote time when the pristine completeness of human life and harmony with nature had been lost. This story is immortalized in *The Masters of Huainan,* a Taoist classic compiled around the time of the official adoption of pseudo-Confucianism as the state orthodoxy.

The use of traditional keys to Chinese symbolism, according to which the sky stands for the mind and the number five stands for the center, suggests that the origin of the doctrine of the "five forces" or "five elements" that figures so prominently in Chinese thought as a central organizational device is at least mythically associated with a prehistoric shamaness who was at one time instrumental in restoring the balance and sanity of her people when they had gone mad—lost their original mental coherence—and were on the brink of destruction.

History and legend seem to meet clearly for the first time in the Taoist lore of the female immortals when King Mu of the Zhou dynasty (r. 1001–952 B.C.E.) met the Queen Mother of the West at her abode in the Kunlun mountains. This is the great Central Asian system called by the Chinese the Ancestor of Mountains and traditionally believed to be a headquarters for the earthly Immortals of the Taoist spiritual government.

Also called the Golden Mother, and the Golden Mother of the Tortoise Pedestal, the legendary figure usually known as the Queen Mother of the West is also believed to have appeared at the court of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty in 110 B.C.E. All women who attain the Tao of spiritual immortality are considered wards of the Queen Mother, and the stories told of her testify to the great antiquity of such beliefs in China.

Next in rank to the Queen Mother of the West in the women's division of the Taoist inner government is the Lady of the Supreme Basis, considered the leader of adepts and said to join the Queen Mother on many of her forays into the ordinary human world. She too is said to have appeared at the court of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, to whom she is reported to have said, "You were born licentious, extravagant, and violent; and you live in the midst of blood and force—no matter how many Taoists you invite here in hopes of immortality, you will only wear yourself out."

The mere fact that this story appears in traditional lore makes a powerful statement about one of the roles of Taoism in Chinese history, that of social protest. (Indeed, the prominence of women in Taoism is in itself a challenge to the Confucian view of humanity.) Emperor Wu ("The Martial Emperor"), one of the most powerful rulers of the Han dynasty, was responsible for the installation of a particular hybrid form of Confucianism as the official state ideology, having become convinced by a certain scholar that stemming the tide of free thought would bolster the authority of the central government.

As conventional history shows, no Confucian scholar could ever make with impunity any criticism of a Chinese emperor even vaguely approaching the force of the statement that Taoist lore attributes to the Lady of the Supreme Basis in her evaluation of Emperor Wu. When even Confucian college students were slaughtered en masse in the late Han dynasty for suggesting that Confucius's teachings on humanity and justice should actually be put into practice by the government, many of the survivors turned to Taoism, joining generation upon generation of seekers of truths that lie beyond the realm of narrow and despotic orthodoxy.

An integral part of Taoist prehistory, the humanitarian element of Taoism—illustrated in historical times by the protest of the Lady of the Supreme Basis—is represented in the tales of Taoist women as antedating the humanistic teachings of the dynastic heroes of proto-Confucianism. One of the ancient Taoist Immortals, a princess of the Shang/Yin dynasty (1766–1123 B.C.E.), a slave society notorious for materialism, cruelty, and disregard for human life, is said to have appeared in the world over a period of two centuries, during which she collected plants to sell to dyers, and used the money to help "orphans and widows, the poor and the sick."

Contrary to notions of otherworldly Taoism popularized by such scholars as Max Weber, social service of this sort is a constant theme throughout Taoist history, and is considered an essential practice for those who aspire to spiritual immortality. Weber characterized Confucianism as "masculine rationality" and Taoism as "feminine hysteria," but if the masculine/feminine polarity has any relevance at all in this context, it might be more historically accurate to characterize Confucianism as "masculine authoritarianism" and Taoism as "feminine nurture," this in a practical sense in both the social and higher psychological domains.

A classic exposition of the humanitarian aspect of Taoism is to be found in the story of the distinguished Immortal Sister Zhao of the Song dynasty (960–1278 C.E.). The question of charitable works was raised by her brother after he overheard her receiving esoteric instructions on rainmaking. He asked her why spiritual immortals, who had transcended the mundane world, would bother to do such things as make rain. Immortal Sister Zhao replied, "Those who have now attained spiritual immortality but cannot as yet live in heaven number in the thousands. They are all in various places on earth accumulating virtue, carrying out practical undertakings so that they may eventually make the ascent.

"Some of them take care of rivers and lakes, some of them manage the hidden government, some are in charge of mountains. *They work to benefit ten thousand generations, to rid the earth of what is harmful, to heal the sick and eliminate problems, acting mercifully toward the troubled and uplifting the fallen, rescuing the weak and helpless.

"Their hidden works are carried out in secret, their virtuous deeds are practiced covertly. Such is their range that they cannot be encompassed in one generalization.* But the spiritual immortals do not take pride in themselves, and are wary of becoming known to the public; therefore worldly people do not get to hear about them."

This description of the earthly activities of Taoist immortals parallels those of Buddhist and Sufi traditions that similarly emphasize the integration of earthly and transcendental aims. In Buddhist tradition, it corresponds to the description of the Samantabhadra bodhisattvas, or Universally Good enlightening beings, as outlined in the comprehensive sourcebook called *The Flower Ornament Scripture (Avatamsaka Sutra),* which contains the totality of the design of Buddhism. In Sufi tradition, it corresponds to the description of the Assembly of the Saints outlined in such eminent works as *Revelation of the Veiled* and *Secrets of the Path,* providing a global overview of the Sufi work.

Shedding light on the nature of the reality behind many a Taoist tale, the idea of the unobtrusive endeavors of unknown sages and saints also illustrates the fallacy of turning to Confucian dynastic histories for hard facts on the history of Taoism. The primitive belief that history consists of stories about the doings of prominent males of aristocratic families or political organizations has done as much to cloud perceptions of Taoist history as has the equally primitive belief that Taoism is adequately represented by remnant cults deriving from folk memories of events triggered by the activities or influences of Taoist "spiritual Immortals" carrying out their secret humanitarian work.

Immortal Sister Zhao's description of the undertakings of the spiritual Immortals also shows how the relative lack of information about great Taoist and Buddhist women in China does not necessarily mean, as some Western neo-Buddhist writers would suggest, that the higher-knowledge traditions of China shared the antifeminism of the secular orthodoxy. It is no doubt true, as the Western experience has demonstrated even in societies externally more liberated than that of ancient China, that it is certainly possible for groups or communities that consider themselves Buddhistic nevertheless to overlook in social practice the Buddha's own teaching on the spiritual equality of the sexes. There are, nevertheless, two other reasons for the relative paucity in the literary record of great women of the higher-knowledge traditions.

One basic reason is encapsulated in Chan Buddhist expressions such as "A skilled artisan leaves no traces," and "She enters the water without making a ripple." Similarly, Taoism idealizes the unknown sage whose benign influence on the community is generally attributed to the course of nature: "The skilled appear to have no abilities, the wise appear to be ignorant." Countless references to the unnoticeability of the true sage to the ordinary eye can be found throughout the literature of Chan Buddhism and Taoism.

The other basic reason is the counterpart of the former: The invisibility of enlightened women is also a result of the (Confucian) culturally conditioned perceptions of secular society. Many female Taoist adepts, or Immortal Sisters, grew up in, and were married into, secular Confucian families and communities. The perceptions of those around them were geared only toward certain definitions of women in terms of social position and duty as defined by quasi-Confucian orthodoxy. Notice of what they did, therefore, was ordinarily taken only within certain parameters.

This is graphically illustrated from a radically different angle in the story of some women who deliberately transformed these social shackles into a means of protecting their inner work on mental freedom and spiritual liberation. By fulfilling society's requirements in an unconventional yet exemplary manner, these women, four sisters in a family with no sons, won relief from certain cultural pressures normally exerted on women. Through their extraordinary ploy, they were able to free their energies to a degree that enabled them to play an unusually prominent role in the development of their community while at the same time inwardly cultivating the higher psychological and spiritual development addressed by Taoist spiritual immortalism.

This is the tale of the famous Four Daughters of the Fu Family, who lived during the early Han dynasty, in the middle of the second century B.C.E. It seems there was a certain Mr. Fu, a well-to-do householder and noted philanthropist, who had reached the age of fifty without spawning a son, but had four intelligent and mannerly daughters.

When the four young women celebrated their father's fiftieth birthday, he said, "I am fifty years old and have no son—what is the use of living long?" His daughters replied, "The reason you want a son is so that you may be taken care of for the rest of your life. We are women, but we can do the work of sons and take care of our parents, so don't worry."

The next day they changed into men's clothes, and all of them remained unmarried so that they could stay at home and take care of their parents. In the manner of great scholars, they read the classics and the books of the philosophers, and also carried out charitable works, so their virtuous influence extended throughout the locality. After thirty years of this, the tale concludes, the whole family—the father, mother, and four daughters—were all beatified and transported living into heaven.

The people of their village were so moved, the record continues, that they set up a shrine to the four daughters, and a twentieth-century recorder of this tale relates that a monument to them still existed over two thousand years later.

One of the salient points of this tale is that the four women were clearly aware of the purely sociological nature of their family situation. That is to say, they did not confuse their social status as daughters in a patrilineal family system with their personal worth as individual human beings.

The perception of daughters as less than worthless—because they were destined to work for other families and care for others' parents—has caused untold psychological damage to women (not to mention countless infanticides) in the course of Chinese history, as Maxine Hong Kingston illustrates in her brilliant book *The Woman Warrior.* This was apparently caused primarily by the rigidity of Confucian ideas of social structure and was exacerbated by the one-dimensional Confucian view of human beings that was inculcated to stabilize this structure internally.

While it is true that many of the more enlightened Confucians broadened their horizons over centuries of contact with Taoism and Buddhism, as a group these conscientious Confucians never had the degree of material, social, or political power held by hereditary elites and the quasi-Confucians for whom culture and learning were primarily political tools and means of furthering personal and family aspirations.

Politically and socially, Taoism never definitively overcame the repressive use of orthodoxy on more than local scales, but it did always provide women and other oppressed groups with opportunities for education and psychological growth traditionally denied them by the Confucian establishment. It also provided such opportunities for frustrated or unorthodox Confucians.

The theme of the Fu daughters refusing marriage is not an unusual one in the lore of Taoist women of ancient times. For the women of old China, what was expected of marriage was socially, psychologically, and sexually quite different from what is expected of and by women of the modern West, so a direct appreciation of what their decision meant to the Fu sisters is not necessarily possible today. Nevertheless, insofar as the question of marital relations in the context of women and spirituality is the subject of lively discussion in recent times, it is of some interest to consider the experiences of the Taoist Immortal Sisters.

One famous story concerns the wife of one Cheng Wei, a high-ranking military attaché of the Han dynasty. Like many aristocratic men of his time, Cheng was intensely interested in the "yellow and white art," that is, in material alchemy. Also undoubtedly like many men of his time, he apparently did not know his wife very well, for unbeknownst to him she was already in possession of Taoist arts and could "communicate with spirits and perform transmutations."

The woman's secret was finally revealed one day when she came to her husband in his private workshop as he was cooking some mercury in an alchemical experiment. She put something into the mercury, whereupon the mercury turned into fine gold.

Astounded, Cheng Wei said to his wife, "The Tao is in you, and yet you didn't tell me—why?" She replied, "To attain this has to be in one's destiny." Not satisfied with her gift of gold, from this point on Cheng tried and tried to cajole his wife into teaching him the art, and also did his best to wait on her hand and foot in hopes that she might tell him the secret. Nevertheless, she consistently refused him.

Finally Cheng and an associate conspired to wring the secret out of her by threat of physical violence. She said to them, "The transmission of the Tao requires a suitable person. If the person is worthy, one should transmit the Tao even if that person is just someone one has bumped into on the road. If the person is unsuitable, one must never transmit the Tao, even if refusal means being torn limb from limb." In the end she feigned madness and ran away; plastering herself with mud, she "left her body" and vanished.

There are a number of interesting points about this story beyond the graphic illustration of the degree of lack of choice Chinese women typically had in the selection of their spouses—and the absence of person-to-person communication in marriage where people were ordinarily considered no more than the social roles that established convention forced them to play.

One intriguing idea in this story is the point already illustrated in the story of Immortal Sister Zhao, that the activities of spiritual adepts, and indeed the identities of spiritual adepts themselves, are by no means necessarily known to the general run of humanity. A correlate of this is the idea that true teaching cannot be obtained on demand and does not respond to mere enthusiasm, desire, or commitment, but requires corresponding inner qualities before genuine communication is possible.

This is the source of the commonplace Taoist theme that the teacher finds the student, and not the other way about. Taoist lore abounds with tales illustrating these principles, with unknown adepts roaming the world looking for sincere individuals capable of sustaining the deep inner knowledge of the Way, while overeager seekers who beat pathways to known or reputed masters are apt to fail time and again to attain their aim, owing to the intrusion of habits of thought and action inconsistent with the inner requirements of the Way. Special tales of the great spiritual "alchemists" recount the trials they underwent to reveal their true motivations, eventually inheriting the secrets without having to ask for them.

There are also many stories of those who did not recognize wisdom until it had already receded into inaccessibility and were left only with a memory. Some, like Cheng Wei, may through their heedlessness of higher values have been left only with something of apparent temporal value. Yet the fulfillment even of these lesser rewards still eluded them, by reason of the very same ignorant sense that had materialized spiritual values to begin with. In Taoist lore, worthy people are sometimes given gold after their probity is tested, while unworthy people are sometimes given gold as a test of whether they can become worthy; in either case, the "gold" has to be transmuted into something yet more refined before it can really benefit the receiver.

Another tale of an enlightened woman married to a man who failed to appreciate the word of wisdom near at hand concerns a noblewoman of the mid Han dynasty, a princess of the imperial family who "from an early age longed for purity and emptiness, revering the supreme Tao." When the Han dynasty was temporarily overthrown by the usurper Wang Mang in 9 C.E., her husband, Wang Gan, was made an ambassador to the Huns. She told him, however, "The country is in disorder and the times are perilous. There is nothing the women can do to help. You should preserve your own peace, retire to practice the Tao. Withdraw a bit from the material world, and you will surely be able to extend your life. If you struggle to go along with the times, participating in the vicissitudes of society, you may not escape the pains of dissolution or the misery of oppression."

But he was bent on worldly success, the story goes, and did not heed her words. The princess left him, and went to live in a hermitage she had built in the mountains. Symbolically, this represents a common Taoist theme, of something ethereal but essential "leaving" human society when attention is frozen on material power.

When Wang Mang's government was overthrown in 23 C.E., and Wang Gan's career consequently went into eclipse, he set off to the mountains to find his wife. According to the tale, however, she had already soared off on the clouds, and all he saw was a pair of scarlet slippers that she had left behind. When he tried to pick them up, he found they had already turned to stone. Later that mountain peak was named the Princess's Peak.

In some families where the aspirations of husband and wife were not united, particularly in those cases where the virtues of the wife far outshone those of the husband, marital dissonance could assume grotesque proportions at times, as in the story of the Immortal Sister known as the Holy Mother of Dongling.

A woman of the fourth century C.E., this Taoist adept was a disciple of another enlightened woman, Fan Yunqiao, whose poems are translated in this volume. As perceptible evidence of her esoteric achievements, it is recorded that the Holy Mother was able to change her appearance and become invisible or visible at will. Her husband, a certain Mr. Du, did not believe in Taoism, however, and was always getting angry at her.

In the characteristic manner of a Taoist adept, from time to time the Holy Mother would leave the house to heal the sick and do various other things to help people; and in the characteristic manner of tyrannical husbands and other persons of a certain mentality, Mr. Du flew into a rage on such occasions. He finally denounced his wife to the local magistrate and had her put in jail. After a short time in captivity, however, she exercised the art of disappearance attributed to a specific class of Taoist adepts and "flew out the window into the clouds," leaving only her shoes behind under the window.

As in the case of many such Taoist immortals, particularly female immortals, the story of the Holy Mother of Dongling does not end with her mysterious disappearance. Local people set up shrines to her all over the place, and found that prayers offered at these shrines were immediately answered. Furthermore, a bird that appeared at a place consecrated to her would respond to questions about stolen objects by flying to the thief, so that soon, people of the area would not even pick up things that had been dropped on the road. What is more, bandits and thieves in the district were said to meet with untimely deaths by drowning or being devoured by wild animals, or in the case of petty theft would mysteriously be injured or fall ill. The result of this was that crime was drastically reduced throughout the region.

Whatever the facts of these cases may be, these folk beliefs at least illustrate the psychological impact exerted by the virtue of this woman and others like her, upon whose memories similar local cults were centered.

Tension of the sort that existed between Mr. Du and the Holy Mother is not, obviously, confined to marital relations in old Confucian societies, but is also well documented in more liberal societies of modern times, where the careers or other extrafamilial activities of women are also known to occasion resentment on the part of their husbands, particularly if the women are more successful in terms recognized by the local culture.

✶It may be that Du's behavior toward his wife was not simply a matter of marital discord, but also a particular manifestation of the paranoia and antagonism commonly displayed by authoritarians toward extraordinary people. This in itself is a regular theme in certain Taoist lore illustrating the limitations of conformism. Du's attitude may also represent that of a cynical pseudo-Confucian bureaucrat toward the actual practice of Confucian humanitarianism. Reform-minded Confucians were commonly confronted with the same sort of bigotry and callousness on the part of established authorities, as illustrated by the mass executions of idealistic college students in the late Han dynasty.

The same sort of attitude is again depicted in a similar story about one of the immortal women known as the Tea Elder.

No one knew the name of this woman of the fourth century. She always appeared to be about seventy years old, except that she walked with a light and strong step, her hearing and vision were sharp and clear, and her hair was black. It was said among the aged of her locality that she had been seen for more than one hundred years, but her appearance had never changed.

She used to carry a bowl of tea leaves to market, and people eagerly bought them from her. She did this from morning to evening, and sold enormous quantities of tea leaves, yet the leaves in her bowl were always fresh and never seemed to diminish. Many people thought her a wonder. The state prefect, however, perhaps in fear of her influence, accused her of breaking the law and had her bound over to prison. At this point, like the Holy Mother of Dongling, she simply took her bowl and flew away.

In many cases the solution did not exist in the same terms as the problem, and the stories illustrating these cases therefore demonstrate dramatic shifts from temporal to ultimate concerns, from the interplay of relations in social situations to the final confrontation of the individual with personal destiny.

Not all of the married Immortal Sisters had problems with their husbands or their political surroundings. It may be that the theme of attempted suppression by ignorant authorities and petty tyrants could be recast, according to the Taoist principle of centered balance, in terms of its converse, the functional utility of mutual understanding or harmony of purpose.

Just as Taoist adepts were commonly hidden within ordinary society, their spiritual connections could also be similarly concealed, for the purpose of greater effectiveness. While there were publicly known Taoist communities and settlements, there were also formless associations existing within the framework of the conventional world. For some Taoists practitioners, marriage itself was an outward cloak of an inner affinity, a miniature esoteric organization within which higher developmental practices could be carried out in private.

For example, the Holy Mother's teacher, Fan Yunqiao, was happily married; but then her husband was not only a righteous and compassionate man, he was also a Taoist adept. According to Immortalist lore, at the end of their lives, Yunqiao and her husband achieved the ultimate consummation of their marriage by flying to heaven together.

This is also reported of Wu Cailuan, the daughter of a great adept and later the wife of a scholar who was evidently so deeply affected by her spiritual influence that eventually he was able to forsake ordinary society and disappear with her.

A similar story of the sublime harmony of a Taoist couple is told from a different angle. During the Han dynasty, it seems, there was a man known only as the Gardener, who was so handsome and good-natured that the local people vied to wed their daughters to him. The Gardener, however, declined all proposals.

The Gardener used to cultivate fragrant herbs of five colors, the tale continues, and ate their seeds for many years, until one day five-colored moths suddenly appeared and gathered around the plants. The Gardener collected the moths in order to get silkworms from the next generation. Eventually, when those silkworms had produced their cocoons, one night a "good woman" appeared at the Gardener's door, calling herself his wife. She showed him how to collect the silk, and they found they had one hundred and twenty cocoons the size of jars, which took sixty days to wind into a single huge ball of silk floss. When this was done, they disappeared together. Subsequently the local people set up a shrine to them, where it became customary to pray for a good silk crop.

Like the story of the Holy Mother of Dongling, this tale is of interest as a representation of the origins of one of the countless local cults that flourished in old China. It also illustrates the Taoist experience of the inner attraction by which the teacher finds the student. What is more, this story contains a theme common in tales of female illuminates that is of particular interest in demonstrating the effect of cultural conditioning on the transmission of traditional lore.

According to the wording of the story, the Gardener's wife was a "spirit woman," a "goddess" or "angel." This is also said of many other female adepts. The idea of extraordinary women as visitors from another dimension may be easy to consider mere superstition, but in any case the structure of the idea has a definite sociopsychological basis in what is now termed male chauvinism, one of the specialties of state quasi-Confucianism.

Throughout history, most Chinese readers and writers were men, and most men were evidently unaccustomed to paying attention to much of anything in the lives of women that was not concerned with their social role as servants of men. As a result, when women, especially young women and girls, were found—as though all of a sudden—to have extraordinary powers that were incomprehensible in terms of the mundane Confucian view of life, the convenient explanation was that they were goddesses, angels, or Immortals who had temporarily appeared in the human world either in response to certain circumstances or as a result of conditional banishment from the heavenly realms.

There were, nonetheless, outstanding female Taoist adepts who in spite of becoming publicly known were not tyrannized or brutalized by ignorant men, and whose accomplishments were recognized as human achievements and were not facilely mythologized. As far as matrimony is concerned, however, it can be observed that these adepts often remained unmarried or eventually separated from their husbands—for as everyone knew, men rarely attain the enlightenment of the Taoist spiritual Immortals, and men like the husband of Fan Yunqiao were few and far between.

Several such Immortal Sisters lived during the Song dynasty. One was Immortal Sister Yu, who learned certain Taoist breathing methods on her own from a discarded book and practiced them until she could live without eating grain, a common immortalist practice. At the age of fourteen she refused to marry, and instead went into the mountains to search for a legendary alchemical workshop.

Immortal Sister Yu is said to have found the workshop in a mountain cave, where she discovered certain Taoist texts. Through these books she learned the arts of transcending the mundane world and refining the physical body. She evidently became famous for her abilities, as she was invited to court by emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125) and given an honorific title of "Real Human."

Another distinguished female adept summoned to the court of Huizong was the famous healer known as Immortal Sister Zhang. Certain lore simply calls her "one who had attained the Tao," but she is also identified as the Immortal Sister Zhang, taught by Lu Yan, who is one of the greats of modern immortalist tradition and Chinese folklore.

As to her healing method, Immortal Sister Zhang did not use herbs, massage, or exercise like many other Taoist healers. According to Immortalist records, she "had the patient sit opposite her with closed eyes, while she subtly projected her energy to attack the disease; the patient's abdomen would suddenly become hot as fire and would growl thunderously. Even chronic illnesses would be cured at once."

There are many stories of the doings of Taoist adepts over the ages, but what is seldom more than hinted at in these tales is the crucial question of how the Taoists actually developed their wisdom and power. An obvious reason for this would be that many *Taoist practices are secret, only passed on by oral instruction after evaluation of the needs and capabilities of the individual. When traditional Taoist embargoes on certain forms of knowledge are taken into consideration, it becomes evident that the stories are themselves tools of the assessment process, designed not simply to inform or instruct, but also to illustrate the psychological condition of the prospective learner through the reactions they provoke.

According to Taoist understanding, knowledge may be power, but power is not necessarily knowledge. For over two thousand years, Taoist writers have repeatedly warned against aberrations and imitations, all of which seem to be rooted in greed for power of one kind or another. These caveats are immortalized in one of the most famous of all Taoist texts, the popular medieval novel *Journey to the West,* which dwells at length on the disruptive consequences of control over energy without corresponding mastery of mind.

In spite of all this, however, many popular books in both Asia and the Occident still present Taoism as consisting of practices that have in fact been condemned or severely restricted for centuries, even millennia. Exercises universally described in authentic Taoist lore as extremely dangerous are marketed in Western books for mass consumption without a word about their side effects.

Some people believe that the idea of sacred knowledge is an anachronism, and that modern society has reached a level of sophistication that allows it to deal effectively with the formerly sacrosanct in a rational and scientific manner. Neither the religious nor the material conditions of today's world would seem to bear this out entirely, however, and it my be that the recent outpouring of information on formerly esoteric sciences, both authentic and imitative, is indicative of a need that is as yet greater than the corresponding capacity.

There is no stemming the tide of interest in the unknown possibilities of humanity in a world painfully confronting its social, political, and material limitations. The danger remains, nevertheless, that the very same psychological biases that trap humanity within social, political, and material dead ends may subconsciously be carried over into the "spiritual" realm of interest, resulting in similar frustrations. The function of esoteric lore such as Taoism as a source of information and illustration rather than as sacred writ or historical curio thus assumes an importance beyond that of traditional or sentimental value.

The present volume addresses itself to individual pragmatic issues, and not to the sociology and politics of times gone by, for the simple reason that it is only by tackling practicalities on an individual level that the living element of Taoism can be brought out of past history and localized culture, into the present reality of everyday life. This means seeking the essential rather than the incidental, the fundamentals rather than the outgrowths, that which applies to the human mind itself rather than to a specific mentality alone.

*Transformational Writings*, a tenth-century work by Tan Jingsheng sums up the Taoist view of evolution and involution in a way that is illustrative of a characteristic abstract essentialist approach to understanding both individual and collective processes:

> The fading away of the Tao is when openness turns into spirit, spirit turns into energy, and energy turns into form. When form is born, everything is thereby stultified. The functioning of the Tao is when form turns into energy, energy turns into spirit, and spirit turns into openness. When openness is clear, everything thereby flows freely.
>
> Therefore ancient sages investigated the beginnings of free flow and stultification, found the source of evolution, forgot form to cultivate energy, forgot energy to cultivate spirit, and forgot spirit to cultivate openness.
>
> When openness turns into spirit, spirit turns into energy, energy turns into form, and form turns into vitality, then vitality turns into attention. Attention turns into social gesturing, social gesturing turns into elevation and humbling. Elevation and humbling turn into high and low positioning, high and low positioning turns into discrimination.
>
> Discrimination turns into official status, status turns into cars. Cars turn into mansions, mansions turn into palaces.

> Palaces turn into banquet halls, banquet halls turn into extravagance. Extravagance turns into acquisitiveness, acquisitiveness turns into fraud. Fraud turns into punishment, punishment turns into rebellion. Rebellion turns into armament, armament turns into strife and plunder, strife and plunder turn into defeat and destruction.

✳ The Taoist writings translated in the present volume address the issue of reversing the process of sclerosis described here by Tan Jingsheng, from the point of view of several women who were noted experts in the inner sciences of Taoism. Works of six distinguished Taoist Immortal Sisters are presented here: Wu Cailuan of the fourth century, also said to have lived during the ninth century; Fan Yunqiao of the third century; Cui Shaoxuan, dates unknown; Tang Guangzhen of the twelfth century; Zhou Xuanjing of the twelfth century; and Sun Bu-er of the twelfth century. Biographical sketches and explanatory notes to their writings are also included.

Part One of this book is devoted to Sun Bu-er, who is undoubtedly the most famous of all the historical Immortal Sisters, having passed into folklore as one of the beloved Seven Immortals and appearing in countless popular novels. Primary focus is on a set of fourteen poems especially prized as one of the great classics of Taoist practice. Three "secret texts" of Sun Bu-er are also included. Part Two presents translations of a canonical collection known as *Poetry of Female Real People: Alchemical Secrets of the Feminine Tao,* which contains poems by the six Immortal Sisters mentioned above. The third section is a translation of *Spiritual Alchemy for Women,* a treatise written in 1899 for Cao Zhenjie, an outstanding female practitioner of the time, outlining basic modes of self-refinement commonly employed in Taoist developmental sciences.

# *Part One*

# *SUN BU-ER*

# INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the Translator's Introduction, Sun Bu-er is one of the most beloved figures of Chinese folklore, standing with her teacher's teachers among one of the favorite groups of popular immortals. Her Taoist title is Clear and Calm Free Human.

In real life, Sun lived in the twelfth century and was a disciple of Wang Zhe, one of the principal founders of the Northern or Pure Serenity school of Complete Reality Taoism. Her husband, Ma Danyang, was also an enlightened disciple of Wang Zhe, and it was through his association with Wang that Sun Bu-er became acquainted with the great Taoist teacher.

Sun Bu-er, whose given name means "peerless," was born in 1124 C.E. She had three children and took up singleminded Taoist practice when she was fifty-one years old. This pattern of entering fully into spiritual Immortalism only after attaining maturity and fulfilling the normal requirements of social life was highly approved of in the Complete Reality school, according to which the preliminary work could be done while in the ordinary world, whereas premature abandonment of society could actually inhibit advanced achievement and even turn cloisters and retreats into collections of people acting out unresolved worldly ambitions in spiritual cloaks.

Sun's husband, Ma Danyang, had entered into Taoist discipleship several years earlier, at the age of forty-five, after having a strange dream. In this dream he followed a Taoist priest to heaven and met the famed Wang Zhe on the way. In the dream Wang talked with Ma all day, telling him how to become really alive. Ma subsequently went to Wang Zhe in waking life and became his student. One day master Wang came to the house of Ma Danyang when Ma was not at home. Pretending to be drunk, Wang reeled across the courtyard, staggered into Sun Bu-er's bedroom, and collapsed there. She took this seriously as an act of impropriety and locked him in the room while she had a servant call her husband.

When Ma returned home and heard what his wife told him, he replied that this was simply impossible, because he had himself just been talking with the teacher. They went to her room to look, but when they opened the door they found the room empty. Then they went together to the Taoist hostel where Wang was staying, and found the teacher there fast asleep.

After this event, Sun Bu-er also became a follower of Wang Zhe. She learned from him not only the pure serene way of complete realization, but also the secrets of talismans and mystic letters. Sun Bu-er later studied with an advanced Immortal Sister who was believed to have been a direct disciple of the great Lu Yan, one of the teachers of Wang Zhe himself. Sun was known at large for dispensing teachings in the guise of divination statements, but she also had a circle of initiate followers.

Sun Bu-er is particularly well known for her famous set of fourteen verses, presented for the first time to Western readers in this collection. We are fortunate to have a series of commentaries on these poems given by Chen Yingning in the early twentieth century. Chen had several decades of experience in Taoist practice, and these talks are a rich mine of quotations from classical lore, elaborating on the traditions of Taoist illuminism.

In addition to these well-known poems, three "secret texts" transmitted by Sun Bu-er are also translated here. These secret texts are said to have been passed down to her by certain mysterious figures, who may represent either some of the many Taoist adepts unknown to history, or visionary personalities contacted in special states of trance.

The first of these texts, entitled *True Scripture on Inner Nourishment of the Embryonic Basis of Jadelike Purity,* is said to have been handed down by the "Real Leader of the Original Terrace of the Jewel Spirit." The second, entitled *Unexcelled True Scripture of Inner Experiences of Jadelike Purity,* is said to have been handed down by the "Celestial Mother of Violet Light, the Great Saintly Empress of the True Celestial Original Heaven of the Universal Network." The "jadelike purity" in the title of these two texts, customarily associated with a certain class of Taoist scripture, refers to the highest of the "three purities," realms of higher existence in which the sages, real people, and spiritual immortals—products of Taoist evolutionary practices—are said to abide.

The third secret text, *Precious Treatise on Preservation of Unity on the Great Way*, or *Mind Mirror of the Mystic Pearl*, is said to have been handed on by the "Realized One of Mount Heng." Mount Heng is the southern of the five holy mountains of China, and the name of this transmitter definitely has a more earthly ring than those of the transmitters of the other two secret texts.

These secret texts elucidate purely psychological meditation methods associated with the Taoist "science of essence," as well as psychosomatic health and healing meditation methods associated with the Taoist "science of life."

Generally speaking, the science of essence is concerned, on a psychological plane, with transcending the causes and effects of personality and conditioning. Beyond this, and on the basis of that transcendence, it is essentially concerned with practical realization of the ultimate nature of the human mind or spirit.

The science of life, on the other hand, is concerned with health and energy, with repelling physical disease and decay, postponing death or making death painless and easy. More generally, it is concerned with all matters of the use and disposition of human or humanly accessible energies in concrete living, both temporal and final.

Several more examples of Sun Bu-er's own poetry are also included in the second section of this volume, "Poetry of Female Real People." Like those of other Immortal Sisters, her verses employ many images from Buddhism, especially the interior contemplation tradition of Chan Buddhism and the universalistic visionary tradition of Flower Ornament Buddhism. Both of these modes of Buddhism figured prominently in the essentialist revival movement in Taoism traced historically to Sun Bu-er and her antecessors, associates, and successors.

# FOURTEEN POEMS WITH COMMENTARY BY CHEN YINGNING

## GATHERING THE MIND

(The same for men and women.)

Before our body existed,
One energy was already there.
Like jade, more lustrous as it's polished,
Like gold, brighter as it's refined.
Sweep clear the ocean of birth and death,
Stay firm by the door of total mastery.
A particle at the point of open awareness,
The gentle firing is warm.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

Before we humans had our bodies, we had this energy. Master Tan's *Writings on Transformation* says, "Openness turns into spirit, spirit turns into energy, energy turns into blood, blood turns into form, form turns into an infant, an infant turns into a child, a child turns into a youth, a youth turns into an adult, an adult ages, the aged die. This refers to going along with the way mortals are made. Those who arrive at the Tao can reverse this, causing blood to turn into energy, energy to turn into spirit, and spirit to turn into openness; then they become immortals."

The "one energy" is the primal energy that is not dichotomized into opposite modes; when it becomes dichotomized, it cannot be called one energy. Confucians say, "Its being is not dual, so its creations are unfathomable." This also refers to the primal one energy. When the Old Master Lao-tzu speaks of "attaining the one," he also means getting this one energy. There is real work involved in this; it cannot be done by mere talk.

"Like jade, more lustrous as it's polished, like gold, brighter as it's refined." When alchemists use terms such as "jade pond," "gold crucible," "jade rabbit," "gold raven," "jade broth," "gold broth," and so on, usually "jade" stands for yin, for spirit, for gentle concentration; usually "gold" stands for yang, for energy, for intense concentration. Sometimes there are exceptions, though.

"Sweep clear the ocean of birth and death, stay firm by the door of total mastery." The ocean of birth and death is people's thoughts. Random thoughts come from nowhere in an instant, occurring and passing away, impossible to stop altogether. The occurring of a thought is "birth," the passing away of a thought is "death." In the space of a single day we are born and die thousands of times; so "transmigration" is right in front of us—no need to wait till we die to experience it.

But if we want to sweep clear these thoughts, that is easier said than done. There is a method to unify thought, which is to "stay firm by the door of total mastery."

The door of total mastery is what the Old Master called the door of the Mysterious Female, and what later Taoists called the opening of the Mysterious Pass. Zhang Boduan said, "This opening is not an ordinary opening. It is made of creativity and receptivity joining together. This is called the lair of spirit and energy. In it are the essences of desire and reason." Put simply, it is just one yin and one yang, one spirit and one energy, that is all; if you can get yin and yang to combine, spirit and energy to mass together, then the substance of the Mysterious Pass will be established.

Though we say the first step is to get rid of random thoughts, that does not mean that it is just a matter of working on thought. If you alienate yourself from everything and do not think of anything at all, you will degenerate and become ineffective, so that others will lose hope of cool objectivity. This is something that you should think carefully about and understand clearly.

By the way, there is another understanding of the saying of

Zhang Boduan that I quoted, but as it is not within the scope of what we are talking about here, I won't bring it up.

As for the final lines, "A particle at the point of open awareness, the gentle firing is warm," the "particle" is used to symbolize the extremely subtle and fine function that takes place when freezing the spirit in the lair of energy; spirit is within energy, energy wraps spirit, withdrawing into storage in secret. "Open" means not getting hung up on the forms of events; "awareness" means not falling into oblivion.

Random thoughts shouldn't be produced; when thoughts arise, the fire heats up too much. The true attention shouldn't be scattered; if the attention is scattered, the fire cools off too much. It should be as Lao-tzu says, "Continuously on the brink of existence, applying it without force." Only then will you accord with the Middle Way.

In the last line, "gentle" means properly adjusted and harmonized; "warm" means not cold and not hot.

This poem talks about the real beginning work when you stand by the Mysterious Pass, which is very subtle and fine. It is certainly not a matter of permanent fixation of the attention on a specific point or part of your body. Do not misunderstand. If beginners keep fixedly to one point and do not know how to change and get through, they will eventually come down with a strange illness.

## NURTURING ENERGY

(The same for men and women.)

The basis starts out uncontrived;
Unexpectedly it falls into the temporal.
As soon as a cry issues from the mouth,
The tongue is in control.
What's more, it's worn out by sense impacts,
And entangled by illness.
When the child is well nourished, it can benefit the mother;
Talk no more of not turning around.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

What follows nature spontaneously without contrivance is the primal Tao, what comes from human effort and is contrived is temporal achievement. We humans, before we were born, were basically an undifferentiated primal unified energy, without name or form; unawares we descend into the womb, and then have bodies. Once we have bodies, troubles come along with them.

"As soon as a cry issues from the mouth, the tongue is in control." When the infant is in the womb, there is only womb breathing; the nose does not breathe. When the infant leaves the womb, it cries out, and the energy in the air of the outside world gets in through the nostrils. Now the acquired breath comes to control human life.

In the beginning, the energy inhaled is more than the energy exhaled, and the body grows stronger day by day. Subsequently the inhalation and exhalation become equalized, and physical development stops. After middle age, the energy exhaled gradually increases, while the energy inhaled gradually decreases, and the body deteriorates day by day. At the end of life, there is only energy left for one last exhalation, and none for inhaling. Once the breath in the nose stops, the root of life is finally severed.

By "tongue" here, Sun means the breathing. Some say she also means speaking, since in many ways we are conditioned and controlled by talk, including talking to ourselves.

She goes on to say this basic energy is also worn out by sense impacts, and riddled with sickness; she has already told us about the normal facts of the birth and death of the human body, now she is telling us about how people destroy themselves by wearing out their minds and powers by indulging too much in sense experiences.

Our natural human life is basically quite short; even if they do not do anything to harm themselves, people today rarely live to be more than a hundred years old. On top of that, the strain of sense impacts and sicknesses can damage and use up people's basic energy, so that they cannot live out their natural lives, and thus die before their times.

"When the child is well nourished, it can benefit the mother; talk no more of not turning around." The child is the temporal energy, the mother is the primal energy. The primal is hard to grasp; it is necessary to start from the temporal in order to return to the primal. When temporal energy is fully developed, then primal energy spontaneously emerges; therefore it is said, "When the child is well nourished, it can benefit the mother." As for the expression "turn around," this means going back to the primal.

## CARRYING OUT PRACTICE

(The first part is applicable
to both men and women;
the last part is for
the use of women alone.)

Gather the breath into the point where the spirit is frozen,
And living energy comes from the east.
Don't get stuck on anything at all,
And one energy will come back to the terrace.
The darkness should go down the front,
The light induced up the back.
After a shower, a peal of thunder
Rumbles at the top of the mountain and the bottom of the sea.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

"Gather the breath into the point where the spirit is frozen, and living energy comes from the east." Gathering the breath means the energy of breathing is stored in hibernation and not stirred; freezing the spirit means that the spirit of open awareness is stabilized and not subject to distraction.

The east is the direction of the sunrise; living energy is a term of contrast to dead energy. Cultivators of old who practiced breathing exercises used to face east from four to eight in the morning and take the living energy in the air into their bodies and use its power to expel stagnant accumulated dead energy from their bodies.

In the highest type of alchemy, there is no limitation of time or place, but it's always best to be in a place where there's clean air, when the weather is warm and the breeze is gentle; then the effect in your body will come along as you practice.

If you can really freeze your spirit and gather in your breath at all times, energizing your whole being, before long you will be able to pick the primal energy out of the cave of creation.

In his commentary on the I Ching, Confucius said, "It is before Heaven, and Heaven does not disobey It. Since even Heaven does not disobey It, what about people? What about ghosts or spirits?"

The action functioning at this stage is real work, with direction and effect; it is not mere talk, and also not an abstract ideal. You only know when you experience it.

Some people ask what this is all about, how do people actually do this? Is it not something that can be given a simple explanation, and it is hard to put into writing. It is necessary to have a lot of understanding and experience, and it is also necessary that the people who study have their wits about them, because they have to be concerned enough to get there on their own before they can enter the door. If everything were written down, that would change living method into dead method. Since the natures and feelings of people of the world are not the same, and their constitutions are different, if they practiced dead methods they could cause illness, thus not only not bringing benefit, but even bringing harm.

"Don't get stuck on anything at all, and one energy will come back to the terrace." A long time ago someone said, "People who cultivate the Tao should shut out all objects and hold firmly to one thought, causing the mind to be as still and quiet as death; then after that they can thereby not die. Let them cause its energy to continue subtly, not stopping, and after that it can remain for a long time. This is energy coming back to the terrace of awareness, which is the essence of consciousness."

The one energy is Life; when Life comes back to the essence of consciousness, this is the so-called "restored elixir."

Chang Po-tuan said, "When cultivation reaches here, a breeze arises in the nirvana center of the brain, the moon is bright in the crimson palace under the heart, the elixir field in the abdomen burns with fire, the midspine is like a cartwheel, the limbs are like mountain boulders, the pores are like after the bath, the bones and circulatory system are like when fast asleep, the vitality and spirit are like husband and wife in blissful embrace, the earthly and heavenly souls are like child and mother remembering their love. This is a real experience, not a metaphor." This might be called a description of the ultimate attainment of this stage.

"The darkness should go down the front, the light up the back."

The operation of active and passive phases of practice come from nature, but human effort also has the power to exert subtle influence, which should not be ignored.

– The active phase is called promoting the fire of light, and its course is up the spine from the coccyx to the center of the brain. The passive phase is called converging back into darkness, and its course is down the chest to the ocean of energy in the abdomen.

Also, when energy rises up the spine, a steamy billow of warm energy is naturally felt throughout the body; when the energy descends down the front of the body, the warm energy gradually cools off and settles. Therefore the growth of the warm energy is called promoting the fire of light, and the leveling of the warm energy is called converging back into darkness. There are many inner subtleties involved here, which need to be thoroughly investigated.

"After a shower, a peal of thunder rumbles at the top of the mountain and the bottom of the sea." A lyric on the Moonwalking Shrine, composed by Lu Yan, says, "Thunder in the earth trembles, it rains on the summit of the mountain." Lu Yan's *Hundred Character Inscription* says, "Dark and Light alternate, everywhere producing a peal of thunder." A poem by Shao Kangjie says, "Suddenly at midnight, a peal of thunder; ten thousand doors, a thousand gates, open one after another." The Real Human Zhongli said, "When the adept gathers primal energy, it thunders all night." The teacher Peng of the Crane Forest said, "When people know the nine-flowered heaven above, all night wind and thunder shake the myriad mountains."

There are countless references to thunder in alchemical classics, but they all come from the I Ching image, which says, "Thunder in the earth, returning." Actually this symbolizes primal unified energy stored for a long time until its power is great, then emerging in action responding to situations. When the energy comes, all the pores in the body open, the sound of wind is heard in the ears, there is a trembling at the back of the head, there is a flash of light in the eyes. The various experiences should be known in advance, so that when they happen you won't be surprised or flustered.

– For women, "thunder" is simply when in the course of the work there is energy in the lower abdomen which thrusts up to the breasts. "Rain" means yin energy, "thunder" means yang energy. In women this effect usually takes place after the menstrual flow has been stopped.

## CUTTING OFF THE DRAGON

(For women only.)

When stillness climaxes, it can produce movement;
Yin and yang mold each other.
Grab the jade tiger in the wind,
Catch the golden bird in the moon.
Keep your eyes on the incubation process,
Keep your mind on the course of following and reversing.
When the magpie bridges are crossed,
The alchemical energy returns to the furnace.

*Commentary by Chen Yingning*

People wonder why women should have to stop their menstrual flow ("cut off the dragon") to practice the Tao. This is something unique to the spiritual immortalists, a mysterious device of the highest order.*This is where cultivation for women is different from men, and this is also why women accomplish the work more rapidly than men. This is the only way to go for an immortal body.

Some may say, if menstruation is a burden to practicing Tao and has to be deliberately stopped, then don't older women past menopause save that much work? Shouldn't their accomplishment be even faster than that of young women?

It could be that if young girls who haven't menstruated have good minds and understand the mystic work, it is by nature even easier for them to attain perfection.

When you get old and your menstrual flow dries up, however, your living energy is depleted. There is a great deal of difference between this and girlhood, so we can hardly generalize.

The method requires producing being from nonbeing, causing the old whose menses have stopped to have their courses once more, and then return them to nothing again. According to the established guidelines for young women cultivating human refinement, they are supposed to stop the flow gradually, in stages.

This is even more difficult—who would say it is easy? This is why ancient bearers of the mystic force used to urge people, "It is best to make adjustments early on; don't be late in grafting life."

"When stillness climaxes, it can produce movement; yin and yang mold each other." When yang peaks it shifts to yin, and when yin peaks it shifts to yang. This is the natural cycle of patterned energy and is nothing strange.

The fifteenth chapter of the *Tao-te Ching* says, "Who can be murky and use the gradual clarification of stillness? Who can be at rest and use the gradual arising of movement after a long while?" The first statement says that if people can be still and quiet, then the murky energy in the body will gradually change into clear energy; the second statement says that when one has been still and quiet for a long time, then movement gradually starts again.

The *Tao-te Ching* says in its sixteenth chapter, "Reaching the extreme of emptiness, keeping quiet steadily, as myriad beings act in concert, I thereby watch the return." The first two lines are about the extreme of quietude, the second two are about the production of movement.

The mutual molding of yin and yang means that yin and yang are based on one another; they are interdependent and complementary, and cannot be separated.

"Grab the jade tiger in the wind, catch the golden bird in the moon." The wind means the breathing, as it says here and there in the alchemical classics. As for the tiger, when you see this term in alchemical texts it usually means the same as lead or gold; it is nothing more than this primal positive energy that moves in the human body after ultimate stillness and quietude.

The moon has two meanings. If you are speaking in terms of work on essence, then the time when not a thought arises is called the moon, in reference to its purity and flawlessness, a solitary light shining alone. If you are talking about work on life, the time when the primal positive energy stirs into motion is also called the moon, as the cycles of the moon go on regularly.

The golden bird is a name for the sun. The sun is fire, fire is associated with mercury, mercury stands for spirit. When gathering primal energy, it is necessary to use acquired energy, the temporal breath, as a point of focus; so "catch the jade tiger in the wind." Jade symbolizes warmth and gentility. The Real Human of the Plum Orchard said, "When wind first arises in the myriad pipes, the moon is full on the thousand mountains." This represents the same experience.

In alchemy, when there is wind there must be fire; when energy moves, the spirit must respond. Therefore Lu Yan said, "Lead is produced, mercury is also produced; producing mercury and lead, cook them together." Lead and the moon symbolize energy, mercury and the sun symbolize spirit. When energy arises, spirit must simultaneously respond; so "catch the golden bird in the moon."

"Keep your eyes on the incubation process, keep your mind on the course of following and reversing." The incubation process is something that goes on in the human body and is not to be written down. All that can be said at this time is that if people have such secrets transmitted to them correctly, they can do the work at any time; otherwise, they are liable to fumble. Though it is said there is the possibility for creating opportunities oneself, the natural, spontaneous opportunity is always better and more marvelous.

At this time, if women follow the potential to create a human being, they become pregnant; if they reverse that potential to go the way of immortals, then they can cull medicine and restore elixir.

But this is not the only meaning of following and reversing. When living potential acts outwardly, this is following; when living potential is stored within, this is reversal. When living energy travels downward to become the menstrual flow, this is "following"; when living energy travels upward and is not allowed to turn into menses, this is "reversing." Therefore, Taoist books say that men train themselves not to emit semen, while women train themselves not to menstruate.

"When the magpie bridges are crossed, the alchemical energy returns to the furnace." The *Guide to Putting in the Elixir* says, "There is a magpie bridge above and a magpie bridge below; heaven corresponds to the stars, earth corresponds to the tides." Later references in alchemical classics to the magpie bridge or magpie bridges are based on this.

In the operation of refining the elixir, it is necessary to go from the lower magpie bridge up the spine, strike and pass through the back of the head to the center of the brain, then from the upper magpie bridge down the windpipe and back into the original ocean of energy in the midsection.

The upper magpie bridge is from the middle of the forehead to the base of the nose; the lower magpie bridge is between the base of the spine and the perineum.

When the alchemical energy reaches the upper magpie bridge, one senses a halo of light flashing between the eyebrows; therefore the classic says, "Heaven corresponds to the stars." When the alchemical energy rises from the lower magpie bridge, one feels there is a warm energy steaming up from the lower abdomen; therefore the classic says, "Earth corresponds to the tide." As for "returning to the furnace," this means when the energy has passed the two magpie bridges, it returns to the yellow court in the center of the torso and stops. The yellow court is sometimes called the earth furnace.

There is, by the way, another interpretation of the upper and lower magpie bridges, but this is not the place to speak of them.

## CULTIVATING THE ELIXIR

(The first two lines are only for women.)

Tie up the tiger and return it to the true lair;
Bridle the dragon and gradually increase the elixir.
Nature should be clear as water,
Mind should be as still as a mountain.
Tuning the breath, gather it into the gold crucible;
Stabilizing the spirit, guard the jade pass.
If you can increase the grain of rice day by day,
You will be rejuvenated.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

The tiger is energy, while the dragon is spirit. The "true lair" is the general area between the breasts. To tie up the tiger and return it to the true lair is what was explained by the Master of Higher Light, One Who Has Reached Emptiness, in these terms: "When women cultivate immortality, they must first accumulate energy in their breasts."

There is a distinction between primal and acquired energy. Refinement of acquired energy uses the method of tuning the breath and freezing the spirit; to gather primal energy, you wait until there is living energy stirring in your body to start. To bridle the dragon simply means to freeze the spirit so as to join it to energy. When spirit and energy unite, the earthly soul and the celestial soul link, and the elixir is crystallized. One of the Celestial Teachers of the Zhang clan, the Empty Peaceful One, said, "Once the original spirit emerges, then gather it back in; when the spirit returns, energy in the body spontaneously circulates. Do this every morning and every evening, and eternal youth will naturally form a spiritual embryo." This is the meaning of bridling the dragon and gradually increasing the elixir.

It might be noted that in this context, the word *dragon* does not have the same meaning as it does in the context of the process known as cutting off or killing the dragon.

"Nature should be clear as water, mind should be as still as a mountain." The Real Human Zhang Sanfeng said, "Freezing the spirit, tune the breath; tuning the breath, freeze the spirit. This should be done all at once, as one operation. Freezing the spirit means gathering the clarified mind within. When the mind is clear and cool, peaceful and light, then you can practice gathering it into the lair of energy. This is called freezing the spirit. After you do this, you feel as though you are sitting on a high mountain, gazing at the myriad mountains and rivers, or as though you have lit a heavenly lamp that lights up all dark realms. This is what is called freezing the spirit in the void. And tuning the breath is not hard; once mind and spirit are quiet, following the breath spontaneously, I just keep this spontaneity."

"Tuning the breath, gather it into the gold crucible; stabilizing the spirit, guard the jade pass."

The Real Human Zhang Sanfeng said, "When you sit, you should embrace energy with spirit, and keep your mind on breath, in the elixir field, with clear serenity, concentrating undistracted. The energy stored within combines with energy coming from outside to crystallize in the elixir field, filling it and growing stronger day by day and month by month, reaching the four limbs, flowing through the hundred channels, striking open the double pass at the middle of the spine, floating up to the nirvana chamber in the center of the brain. Then it turns and goes down to the heart and enters the field of elixir below in the abdomen. Spirit and energy keep to one another, resting on one another with each breath, and the course of the Waterwheel (the cycle of energy circulation) is opened. When the work reaches this point, the effective construction of the foundation is already half done."

Sanfeng also said, "Tuning the breath calls for use of the temporal breathing to seek the realm of the breathing of the Real Human Being. But to tune the temporal breathing calls for letting it tune itself, for only in this way can it be tuned in such a way as to be able to rouse primal breathing. I just become empty and stay quiet, that's all. Once the true breath stirs, the Mysterious Pass is not far away. If you progress in practice with this in mind, you may be expected to have constructed the foundation soon."

The Master of Expanded Development said, "Embrace the spirit with quietude, that your body may thus right itself. If there is no strain on your body, no disturbance to your vitality, then you can live long. When the eyes see nothing, the ears hear nothing, and the mind knows nothing, your spirit preserves your body, so the body can live long. Be careful of what's inside, shut out what's outside. Minding too many things brings ruin. I keep whole, to be in harmony, so I have cultivated myself for twelve hundred years, and my body has not deteriorated."

When it comes to methods for tuning the breath, Sanfeng is most detailed, while as far as stabilizing the spirit is concerned, the Master of Expanded Development is most refined.

When the immortal lady spoke of the gold crucible, she was talking about intense concentration; then when she spoke of the jade pass, she was talking about gentle concentration.

"If you can increase the grain of rice day by day, you will be rejuvenated." In response to questions about what this "grain of rice" is, I can bring up an alchemical classic by Chang Po-tuan. This classic, which gives the general outline of the science of spiritual alchemy in four hundred Chinese characters, says, "The Undifferentiated encloses Space, Space encloses the worlds of desire, form, and formlessness. When you look for the root source of it all, it is a particle big as a grain." It also says, "A grain, and a grain again; at first scarcely perceptible, it eventually becomes clearly evident."

This is the meaning of the statement "If you can increase the grain of rice day by day . . ." Put simply, it is a matter of gradual culling and refinement of spirit and energy, gradually solidifying and combining them. It does not mean that this little ball of spirit and energy combined has a definite shape like a grain of rice that you can find.

The *Triplex Unity*, the Ancestor of Alchemical Texts, says, "Gold sand enters the five innards, mist scatters like wind and rain. The steaming reaches the four limbs, the complexion is pleasingly moist and the color is good, hair that has turned white all turns dark, and new teeth grow where old ones have fallen out. Old men become like young mature men again, old women become like maidens again. Those who can change their bodies and avoid the trouble and danger of the world are called Real Human Beings."

This is the meaning of the conclusion of the Immortal Sister's remark.

## THE WOMB BREATH

(The same for men and women.)

If you want the elixir to form quickly,
First get rid of illusory states.
Attentively guard the spiritual medicine;
With every breath return to the beginning of the creative.
The energy returns, coursing through the three islands;
The spirit, forgetting, unites with the ultimate.
Coming this way and going this way,
No place is not truly so.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

Illusory states or objects are all situations in the world and everything in them that frustrate and fatigue people. They may be further described as all forms of oppression that continually pull us and wrap around us. This goes on until we die, unless we get rid of them ourselves. If we do not get rid of them, our next state of being after death will still be like this, or even worse than before.

So it is that those who would practice the Tao need to set up some way to cut decisively through entanglements in sense experience before they can obtain quick results.

Some people practice Taoism for decades without any progress, all because they have not yet shed bondage to the ordinary world.

Now it occurs to me that although the interpretation just offered is correct, it nevertheless is not the original meaning of "illusory states." I have just simply given an elementary explanation for beginners.

Actually, "illusory states" are hallucinations produced by hidden influences in the body under certain circumstances. Sometimes they attract and charm people, sometimes they frighten people, sometimes they anger people, sometimes they sadden people; they may induce people to mistake them for spiritual communications or powers, and they may induce people to enter false paths. In extreme cases they can cause dementia and self-destruction. People may have chance visions or hear voices, and claim they have met the saints.

Things like this are all illusory states, or they might be called illusory objects; they should be swept away. Without objective perception, it is hard to distinguish them from reality. That is why learners need to follow teachers. There are people who have studied Taoism for decades without negative influences presenting obstacles, all because they have not really practiced the Tao.

"Attentively guard the spiritual medicine, with every breath return to the beginning of the creative." The spiritual medicine is subtle being, and subtle being means true breathing. So attentively guarding the spiritual medicine means keeping the attention on the breathing.

The beginning of creation is true openness, and true openness is the awareness of Tao. With every breath returning to the beginning of creation thus means the breathing staying with the mind. Even if beginners can keep mind and breath together, because they have not done it for long, they again separate; when one reaches the womb breath, then mind and breath are always together.

"The energy returns, coursing through the three islands; the spirit, forgetting, unites with the ultimate." The three islands are a metaphor for the three "elixir fields," sensitive areas in the human body—the upper one in the head, the middle in the thorax, and the lower in the abdomen.

The Old Master Lao-tzu said, "Returning to the root is called quietude; quietude is called going back to Life." This is the meaning of energy returning. The human body originally comes from the great void; once it falls into material form, it has resistance, and cannot merge with the great void. Only those imbued with the Tao can forget all material form. Once material form is removed from the focus of attention, then one merges with the great void.

There was someone named the One Hidden in the Sky who was a follower of Taoism. He said, "When people cultivate reality, if they cannot awaken all at once, they must practice it gradually. One thing they can do is called fasting and discipline, to purify the body and empty the mind. Another is called staying in place, abiding in seclusion in a quiet apartment. A third is called sustaining thought, gathering mind back into the nature of consciousness. A fourth is called sitting forgetting, in which one ignores the body and forgets the self. A fifth is called spiritual understanding, which all realities convey to the spirit." A practice like this is very difficult, and cannot be perfected in a day and a night. Those with determination accomplish their tasks; it is just a question of how powerful the person is.

"Coming this way and going this way, no place is not truly so." "Truly so" is a Buddhist term. A Buddhist classic says, "The potential for coming to be so has two meanings; one is from the perspective of birth and death, one is from the perspective of the truly so. When the mind has no birth or death, meaning when it is not "caught up" in the coming and going of thoughts, it goes to the truly so. If it turns away from the truly so, then it is born and dies." It is also said, " 'Truly' means truly real and not unreal or false. 'So' means what is always so and has no change."

## THE CONVERGENCE AND THE FIRE

At the point where the womb breath is continuous,
You should distinguish the beginnings of movement and
stillness.
The yang light should be increasingly advanced,

The yin soul should be prevented from flying off.
The pearl in the pond contains images,
The moon at the summit of the mountain spews light.
Twenty-four hours a day, don't be lazy;
Irrigate the herb sprouts richly.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

The so-called yin convergence and yang fire, the still and active states of energy, were already present in the stages of practice outlined earlier, and are not only practiced after the womb breath.

But before reaching the step of crystallizing the elixir, the movement of energy always has a time when it thrusts upward into the breasts in women and downward into the genitals in men. Once the elixir is crystallized, women's breasts become as firm as those of a virgin; though there is movement of energy within the body, it cannot go outward anymore, it just moves within.

Also, movement has its times. Sometimes there is one movement in several days, sometimes several movements in one day, depending on the diligence or otherwise of practice. In any case, before the movement of energy and after the movement of energy there is stillness.

"The yang light should be increasingly advanced, while the yin soul should be prevented from flying off." Movement is associated with yang, the positive or light principle, while stillness is associated with yin, the negative or dark principle. When yang energy moves, the basic spirit also moves along with it—wherever the energy goes in the human body, the spirit also goes there. The movement of the yang energy is called advancement; when the Immortal Sister speaks of increasingly advancing the yang light, she means using the spirit to subtly foster the movement of energy. Now when yang peaks, yin arises, and when movement culminates it returns to stillness. The upper soul in humans is associated with yang, and is what rises; the lower soul is associated with yin, and is what descends. When ascending, it is impossible to descend, and when descending it is impossible to ascend. "The yin soul should be prevented from flying off" means that if the energy has a state of quiet stability, then the spirit should help it be quiet and stable, to prevent it from flying off unstably.

"The pearl in the pond contains images, the moon at the summit of the mountain spews light." First of all, this statement is just for women; but you men might as well listen too.

The "pond" is below, a metaphor for the womb, known as the "sea of blood." The "mountain" is above, a metaphor for the place between the breasts, in the center of the chest. The light of the "pearl" is hidden, withdrawn; the light of the "moon" is shining bright. "In the pond" and "contains images" represent stillness and profound withdrawal; "the summit of the mountain" and "spews light" represent the working of movement coming out manifestly.

"Twenty-four hours a day, don't be lazy; irrigate the herb sprouts richly." "Twenty-four hours a day" does not mean clock time, but the biorhythms of the human body. The ancients talked about specific periods of time, but it is important not to stick to calendar or clock time, lest a living method be turned into a dead one. If you're wondering what the twenty-four hours of the human body are, they are simply the movement and stillness of spirit and energy, the process of rising and descending of yin and yang.

"Don't be lazy" means that one should not arouse thoughts or let the focus of mind be distracted; go straight through to the conclusion, and don't allow any interruption—one may only act freely when this stage of work is done.

## GRAFTING THE MEDICINE

With the mystic device half realized,
The elixir pill forms like a dewdrop.
Though now you can stabilize life,
How can you refine the body?
Gazing at the nose, one takes in pure positive energy;
The spiritual lead is effective throughout the body.
Be careful in feeding;
When completely fulfilled, you then leap into flight.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

The whole work of spiritual immortality is half done when one gets to this point, because the inner elixir has already crystallized. Dew is water from the ground that has evaporated and dispersed into the air, then in the cool of the night sticks to whatever dissipates heat most easily, and condenses into dew. The science of alchemy is based on the same principle, but it is hard to convey in words and is to be understood spiritually.

"Though now you can stabilize life, how can you refine the body?" Once the elixir is crystallized, the vitality, energy, and spirit in the body become completely stabilized. It is certainly possible to extend life in this way, but not yet possible to become physically transformed; at this stage, one can be called a human immortal.

According to ancient lore, there are five classes of Immortals: ghost Immortals, human Immortals, earth Immortals, spiritual Immortals, and celestial Immortals.

Ghost Immortals remain ghosts, but they are different from ordinary ghosts in that they are able to communicate spiritually and subsist for a long time.

Human Immortals remain human, but though they eat, drink, and dress like people, yet they can avoid the calamities of aging, sickness, and death.

Earth Immortals remain on the earth, but they are not affected by cold or heat, hunger or thirst. Though they cannot project their spirits, yet they can avoid the bother of food, clothing, and shelter.

Spiritual Immortals are capable of supernatural powers and transformations; coming and going at will, they can shed the physical shell to attain an ethereal independence. They can dissolve into energy or solidify into form.

Celestial Immortals go even further in their work than spiritual immortality. They go beyond our human world, to another world that cannot be imagined by the ordinary intellect.

"Gazing at the nose, one takes in pure positive energy, the spiritual lead is effective throughout the body." This statement is about the real work by which one can transcend the ordinary and become a sage; this is the only way to project the spirit of light. Hardly anyone in the twentieth century can even understand this practice, let alone carry it out. Therefore, rather than try to explain it myself and take the chance of causing misunderstanding, I have decided to call on ancient tradition to explain the alchemical method of "refining the body with real emptiness."

According to this method, the breath of Heaven and humanity is a continuum, flowing back and forth. Humans live on the breath given by Heaven, and they die when Heaven takes the breath away again.

Therefore sages observed the course of Heaven, and took up after Heaven in their conduct. Every morning before sunrise they would still their minds and sit quietly, waiting for the sun in a state of empty openness. Inwardly laying aside ideas and thoughts, outwardly disengaging themselves from objects, all at once they forgot about the universe and broke through space.

Then a point of positive energy, like a drop of dew, like lightning, would spontaneously appear in the great void and enter their bellies, passing into the spine and rising up to the center of the brain; there it would turn into sweet rain and shower the inner organs. The sages would then cause this energy to circulate throughout their bodies, cleaning them out and burning away pollution, to change their bodies into masses of pure light. After a long period of development, they would transform their bodies and become immortal.

The *Song of the True Tao Destroying Confusion* says, "If you can prevent danger for a hundred days, your blood will turn to oil, and your body will be like silver. If you can go a hundred days without slipping, jade oil will flow and moisten, radiating shining light."

A poem by the adept known as Emerald Void says, "Permeating the body is golden light, the marrow of the bones is fragrant. With gold sinews and jade bones, one is pure creative energy. Refine the blood to make it flow white; mundane energy dissolves away, and the body is naturally strong and healthy."

Master Qiu of the Eternal Spring said, "If you can keep your attention continually on your breath, you will change your body so that in it jade liquid will flow."

Master Zhang of the Purple Gem said, "The one energy of Heaven and humans is originally the same; but it is blocked by the physical body and cannot commune. Refine the body to the point where it merges with the spirit, and then you will know that matter is identical to true emptiness."

There are sometimes said to be six methods of refining the body.

One is called refining the body with jade liquid, the second is called refining the body with gold liquid, the third is called refining the body with a predominance of yin, the fourth is called refining the body with a predominance of yang, the fifth is called refining the body through inner observation, and the sixth is called refining the body with true emptiness. The first five are not the Great Tao of open nonreification, and are incapable of developing one to the point of uniting with cosmic space. Only the last, refining the body with true emptiness, is real noncontrivance, even though it does involve doing something; and in reality, though it is called refining the body, it is actually refining the spirit. This is cultivation of the external including cultivation of the inward.

If you practice refinement according to the right method for one hundred days, according to the teachings of the ancient masters, then your earthly souls will lose their forms, the parasites that sap your vitality, energy, and spirit will disappear without a trace, the senses will submerge into hibernation, and demons will flee. If you carry out this refinement for a thousand days, your whole body will become like a crystal tower, clear inside and out; the flower of your mind will be radiant, and a spiritual light will become manifest.

So the *Classic on the Living Spirit* says, "When the body and spirit are coordinated and unified, this is the real body. When body and spirit join, the body is mastered in following the Tao. When in concealment, the body stabilizes with the spirit; when expressed, the spirit combines with the energy. Therefore it is possible to be invulnerable to water and fire, to cast no shadow in the sun- and moonlight. Whether to remain in existence or pass away is up to you; you may leave or enter without obstruction. Some remain physically in the world, some shed their bodies and ascend to immortality."

The step of work called refining the body by true emptiness has a very wide scope, and does not only apply to this particular talk by Sun Bu-er. Even though she goes on to speak of methods of refining spirit, ingesting alchemical medicine, avoiding grain, facing a wall, and projecting spirit, nevertheless these are not outside the functioning of this work of refinement by true emptiness. It is just a matter of distinguishing stages according to the depth of accomplishment of the work.

"Be careful in feeding; when completely fulfilled, you then leap into flight." Feeding means gently nurturing. Being completely fulfilled means that one's energy is sufficient and the medicine has taken effect. Leaping into flight seems to refer to when the great medicine—the accumulated primal energy—shoots up through the passes, sensitive key points in the body. This is not yet the time when one can fly up into the air.

## REFINING THE SPIRIT

The relic from before birth
Enters one's heart one day.
Be as careful as if you were holding a full vessel,
Be as gentle as if you were caressing an infant.
The gate of earth should be shut tight,
The portals of heaven should be first opened.
Wash the yellow sprouts clean,
And atop the mountain is thunder shaking the earth.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

"Relic" is a term borrowed from Buddhism and used here as a metaphor for the original spirit. "Before birth" means before this physical body existed.

The original spirit of human beings never changes; what changes is the conscious spirit, which is the temporarily conditioned mind. The work of using true emptiness to refine the body means to gradually refine away this conditioned mind, so that the original spirit can gradually become manifest. This is like polishing a mirror; once dirt is cleaned off the surface, its reflective clarity appears. Then you know that all spiritual powers are inherent in the original nature of human beings, and do not come from outside.

Now when Sun says this "relic" enters one's heart, it seems that she is talking about energy, but at this point energy and spirit are already inseparable. Speak of spirit, and energy is therein; speak of energy, and spirit is therein.

The *Song on Tapping the Lines* by Lu Yan says, "The lead pond spews golden light; a flowing pearl of mercury fire enters the imperial capital." Here, "lead pond" and "golden light" refer to energy, while "mercury fire" and "flowing pearl" refer to spirit. The "imperial capital" is the center elixir field, also called the crimson chamber and the spirit room; it is the region of the heart. The heart is the lord of the body, so it is called the imperial capital. This song here says the same thing that Sun says when she speaks of the relic from before birth entering one's heart.

"Be as careful as if you were holding a full vessel, as gentle as if you were caressing an infant." Lao-tzu said, "To keep full is not as good as stopping." He also said, "Those who preserve this Tao do not desire fullness." He also said, "Great fullness is like emptiness, its use is boundless." This is what Sun is talking about too.

Lao-tzu also said, "Concentrate the energy and make it flexible; can you be like an infant?" He also said, "I alone abide in repose before anything happens, like an infant before it smiles." He also said, "People live through flexibility and yielding, they die through obstinacy and forcefulness."

"The gate of earth should be tightly shut, the portals of heaven should be first opened." "Earth" can refer to the lower body, while "heaven" can refer to the upper body. To close the gate of earth means not to let vital energy drain away; when the vital energy in the body gradually builds up to repletion, and cannot drain away, it will thrust upward into the brain. When this happens, one hears the sound of wind and sees a flash of light; the back of the head trembles, while the lower abdomen convulses—a great many unusual experiences are associated with this process.

A seventeenth-generation master of the Dragon Gate school of Taoism, a certain Hong Jiaocui, is said to have composed a poem called *Song of the Gold Pill*, in which he referred to such experiences in these terms: "Ten thousand horses rush at the ears in full gallop, shooting stars and flashing lightning burn the eyebrows. If you get to this point, don't be startled or frightened—hold the mind-spirit fast, don't let it move."

This refers to the phenomena that take place when "closing the gate of earth" and "opening the portals of heaven."

"Wash the yellow sprouts clean, and atop the mountain is thunder shaking the earth." Lu Yan told one of his disciples, the Immortal Sister Zhang, when he initiated her, "Thunder in the earth vibrating, there is rain on the mountain; it is necessary to wash the yellow sprouts emerging from the earth."

"Yellow sprouts" is just another name for the great restoration elixir. The "top of the mountain" here generally means the center of the brain or the center of the top of the head, what is also called the chamber of nirvana.

The Immortal Sister Sun has already spoken of an experience she referred to as "rain and thunder on the top of the mountain and bottom of the sea," and there seems to be no difference when considered literally, but in actual experience there is a great difference.

Now as for the operation of "washing," this is nothing but quietude and stabilization. In the alchemical process, after a small stillness there is a small stir, while after great stillness there is a great stir. The deeper the power of stillness and stabilization, the greater the effect of stirring, which means movement of energy. When the stirring is great enough, one can use it to thrust open the top of the head and get the energized spirit out of the body. It cannot be done, though, except after tremendous stillness.

To explain this phenomenon of energy stirring more thoroughly, this power of stillness and stabilization can progress from short- to long-term, from shallow to deep, as long as we can be masters of ourselves. As far as the experience of stirring is concerned, this is just a matter of following nature, and cannot be counterfeited by human effort. It seems that it cannot be actually performed, but the general reaction is that small stillness produces small stirring, and great stillness produces great stirring.

The reason people commonly do not have this experience is because they are not as yet able to be still and stable. When practitioners cannot attain great results, it is because even though they know how to be still and stable, nevertheless the power of their stillness and stability is still weak. Buddhists who practice Zen also are able to be quiet and still for days on end, but ultimately never have this experience, because they only know how to sit and do not know how to refine energy.

## INGESTION OF THE MEDICINE

The great forge produces mountains and waters,
Containing therein the potential of creation.
In the morning, greet the energy of the sun;
At night, inhale the vitality of the moon.

In time the elixir can be culled;
With the years, the body naturally lightens.
Where the original spirit comes and goes,
Myriad apertures emit radiant light.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

The great forge is a metaphor for the effect of creation. Heaven and earth are the furnace and cauldron, yin and yang are the water and fire; myriad forms are molded from this, so all things have the absolute in them. Mountains and waters are specific things among other things, but they also have the absolute in them, and represent the interacting of energy configurations manifesting the potential of creation.

People who cultivate immortality like to accumulate the clear living energy from the air in their bodies; after that they take the human spirit, combine it with this energy, then refine and develop this. After a long time, spirit and energy unite, and the great elixir first forms. The mountains are appropriate for the second half of the work, because the pure living energy in the mountain air is superior to that of urban areas.

Nevertheless, when you go into the mountains it is still necessary to be somewhat choosy about the configuration of the location you pick. You may build a house or stay in a cave, but it is essential to have a place which faces the sunlight, away from the shade, where the wind is blocked and energy can build up. As the sun and moon rise and set, the wheel of creation turns; Taoists practice sitting at these times, to get this boundless clear living energy and use it to nurture the original spirit.

"In the morning, greet the energy of the sun; at night, inhale the vitality of the moon." If people know how to absorb the vital energy of sun and moon, they can crystallize the elixir of immortality and transform the ordinary body. As far as the method of absorption is concerned, when you get to this stage you will spontaneously understand; don't cling to trace forms, for that would obstruct complete communion.

In passing, it might be noted that the method of taking in sunlight and moonlight as explained in the *Classic on Easing the Tendons* is an advanced method of cultivation of martial arts, and is not the mysterious marvel of the Immortalists.

"In time the elixir can be culled; with the years, the body naturally lightens." To cull the living energy of heaven and earth to crystallize the elixir, it is necessary to know the times when yin and yang wax and wane. To take over the mysterious function of creation and change one's body requires years of effort.

"Where the original spirit comes and goes, myriad apertures emit radiant light." This means that radiant light comes from every pore of the body. An alchemical text says, "When the work is fulfilled, no one knows, but everything around you becomes radiant."

As to the reason for the light, from the point of view of a twentieth-century person, it may be due to the body's being full of electricity.

## ABSTENTION FROM GRAIN

(The same for men and women.)

Once you can feed on the living energy,
Your lungs will be in an extraordinary state of clear coolness.
Forget the spirit, and there are no appearances to cling to;
Merge with the ultimate, and existent emptiness is gone.
For breakfast, look for wild taro roots;
When hungry at night, pick wetland mushrooms.
If you mix in smoke and fire,
Your body will not walk on the jewel pond.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

This means the practice of abstention from cooked food. It is possible to do this because the living energy, the spiritual breath, fills our bodies, so that we naturally do not think of eating. It does not mean starving oneself or enduring hunger.

"Forget the spirit, and there are no appearances to cling to; merge with the ultimate, and existent emptiness is gone." When you forget the spirit you may have knowledge and wisdom but do not use it; if you boast of brilliance, it is easy to produce demonic obstructions. When you forget the spirit, there are then no appearances to cling to, in the sense that there are no forms that you can fixate upon when you don't use cognition.

Merging with the ultimate means merging with what is known as the great limit, the state of unity before any sort of polarization.

Merging with the ultimate means spirit and energy unite, yin and yang intertwine. When this happens, one does not fall into insensate "emptiness," so Immortal Sister Sun says existent emptiness is gone. This means detaching from "emptiness" when you experience it.

The Peerless Immortal here speaks of not fixating on form or appearances, and also not fixating on emptiness or a sense of nothingness; when form and emptiness are both forgotten, one is united in great stability.

"For breakfast, look for wild taro roots; when hungry at night, pick wetland mushrooms." Taro roots, a potatolike food, are common. As for mushrooms, she is referring to a kind of mushroom that is firm and shiny, and is said to come in six varieties—red, yellow, white, black, and purple. Eating any of these can lighten the body and prolong life. What the classics of Immortalism refer to as spiritual mushrooms are of as many as several thousand varieties, too many to mention, but are in any case not available to ordinary people.

"If you mix in smoke and fire, your body will not walk on the Jewel Pond." The immortal body should be pure clear spirit. If you do not abstain from cooked food, then ordinary murky energy will mix into the body, so you cannot hope to transcend it.

The Jewel Pond is an abode of female Immortals. Legends of the Immortals say that the palace of the Immortal Queen Mother of the West has a jewel pond on its left.

## FACING A WALL

All things finished,
You sit still in a little niche.
The light body rides on violet energy,
The tranquil nature washes in a pure pond.
Original energy is unified, yin and yang are one;
The spirit is the same as the universe.
When the work is done, you pay court to the Jade Palace;
A long whistle gusts a misty gale.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

The expression "facing a wall" started in the time of Bodhidharma, the founder of Chan Buddhism. In the sixth century

Bodhidharma stayed at Shaolin Temple on a mountain in China, where he sat all day facing a wall, nine years going by like a single day. Therefore later Taoists who were working on stillness referred to it as facing a wall. Nowadays it is the Buddhists who do not have this; all they know how to do is recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Light.

"All things finished, you sit still in a little niche." Once the barrier of avoiding grain is passed, not only can one stop eating cooked food, one can even stop eating things like mushrooms and taro.

When ancient immortals had practiced self-refinement to this stage, many of them chose rock caves deep in the mountains to live in; they would have others block the entrance to the cave with boulders to keep out wild beasts and other people, so they wouldn't be attacked or bothered. They didn't even need protectors. In the twentieth century, though, this method is not necessarily appropriate.

An ordinary way of doing it is to build several reed bungalows in the mountain forest where the air and environment are pure and clean, so people on the same Path can stay there. After that you build a little tabernacle of wood, one large enough only for person to sit in. You put a thick cushion in it, and have a door on the front; the other three sides should be made so as to be ventilated but not drafty, such as by using screens of woven bamboo strips to cover them.

Having made this tabernacle, or "niche," a person sits inside until the light spirit leaves the body, however long it takes. But it does require that there be people guarding the person day and night, to be careful to forestall unexpected dangers.

In the meantime, if one does not wish to sit all the time, it is considered all right to go out for a while too. Now at this point, the body is so full of energy that one does not think of food, the spirit is so complete that one does not think of sleep. As to one's outward condition, there is no apparent breathing in the nose, no pulsing in the veins; the whole body is warm, and there is a spiritual light in the eyes. The function of the internal organs is not the same as that of ordinary people, and it is impossible to impose judgments on it on the basis of ordinary human biology.

Even in the present time many people experience this sort of phenomenon; I have even seen cases myself. However, I do not know what spiritual powers they had. Then again, it won't do to jump to conclusions; this could be what alchemical classics call being wise but not using it.

I have been seeking teaching on the Way for thirty years, but have never yet really seen what the light spirit is like or how it is projected. The transmission of teachers of my day does not touch on this; all they said was you'll know when the time comes. Therefore, as I do not have actual experience of the various functions possible after projection of the light spirit, I do not dare to make something up, so I won't explain the rest of what Sun Bu-er has to say about "facing a wall."

Anyway, if people learning the Way of the Tao can actually carry out the work of "facing a wall," why worry they won't know about freeing the spirit? Why not calm down, avoid getting excited, and patiently await personal experience in years to come. In short, what Sun has to say from here on is in reference to an inconceivable realm, and I have to be sparing in what I say, though I know I can't avoid speaking altogether in view of my role as interpreter.

## PROJECTING THE SPIRIT

There is a body outside the body,
Which has nothing to do with anything produced by
  magical arts.
Making this aware energy completely pervasive
Is the living, active, unified original spirit.
The bright moon congeals the gold liquid,
Blue lotus refines jade reality.
When you've cooked the marrow of the sun and moon,
The pearl is so bright you don't worry about poverty.

### *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

If I don't comment on this statement by Sun Bu-er at all, there may seem to be something missing, whereas if I tried to comment line by line, I wouldn't know where to begin. All I can do is to draw on some sayings of wise people of the past, to see what the experience of projecting the spirit is like. After projecting the spirit, there is still work; if you want to know the details, then please make a broad study of the alchemical classics, participate truly in the practice, and realize genuine understanding.

According to the sayings of the Old Man of the Blue Flower, "A foresign of the emergence of the light spirit from its encasing is when there is light pouring out of your umbilical region, and fragrance spontaneously issuing from your nose and mouth. After emergence, a gold light shoots in all four directions, through every pore of the body, liquid crystal, like the sun when it first rises over the ocean, like a pearl when it first comes out of the deep. A fragrant air, laden with energy, fills the room; a peal of thunder, gold and fire flow into each other, and the light spirit has emerged from the brain.

"After projecting the spirit, watch completely your everyday work; if the light spirit is pure, it is a crystallization of the primal energy of awareness and it will not be affected by objects. You can take it in or let it out at will. Once it enters the center of the brain, the body burns like fire, golden light again radiates from the pores, and fragrant air again becomes laden with energy; in a while it returns to the Yellow Court, in the center of the torso, where it exists as though nonexistent, unknown, unsuspected. This is a true state.

"If your basic mind is not yet open and clear in everyday life, the 'embryo' you form will not be the spiritual embryo, and the spirit you project will be adulterated; when it sees what is frightening, fear arises, and when it sees what is desirable, attraction arises. It is in danger of flowing on and on and forgetting to return, falling into demon states. Once you die, people who don't know may think you were an immortal who changed—died—as you sat, not realizing that those whose light spirits emerged once and never came back are not really worth talking about."

Someone asked the old man, "If the mind is not yet pure but the encased spirit has already emerged, what can be done about it?"

The old man answered, "One has no choice but to go on to the step of refining emptiness; though the encased spirit has emerged, it is necessary to hold it in tightly and complete the step of refining emptiness. Then let it out again, and the cosmos of true light will expand and transform it as it wanders at will.

"Refinement of emptiness calls for the heart to be wide open, without sense of self or other, oblivious to the universe, sensing a clear open energy in the midst of nondifferentiation that is self but not self, empty but not empty, indivisible in the course of evolution, presenting nothing to combine with. This is called refining emptiness. It is a matter of using the emptiness of the light spirit to merge with the emptiness of the great void, so that there is no gap between them. This is what is called sublimation of body and mind together, uniting with the Tao in reality. This is something that takes place after projection of the spirit, but before multiplication of the body."

Someone else asked, "What is the difference between the light spirit and the dark spirit?"

The old man said, "When the spirit is projected too soon, before it is purged of mundane shadows, it is called the dark spirit. When it emerges, one may see white light in some form, in which case the spirit is emerging from the eyes; or one may hear the sound of bells, cymbals, and pipes, in which case the spirit is emerging from the ears. Because the light energy is not strong enough, it cannot break through the Celestial Pass, and therefore goes off on side roads, whichever is easiest. After emerging, it also roams around blissfully, through the streets and alleys, to the rivers and up the mountains. It can only take form, it cannot multiply form; it can only travel in the human realm, it cannot fly and transmute. On a sunny midsummer day, the dark spirit will fear and flee the sun; so even though it has something of the air of immortals about it, still it is not beyond the realm of ghosts."

Another questioned, "Can the dark spirit be refined into the light spirit?"

The old man answered, "It can. If people learning Immortalism are not satisfied with resting by themselves in a small vehicle, having only attained emergence of the dark spirit, but go on to cultivate further refinement, they smash the form of the dark spirit, turn over the gold crucible and jade furnace, and start the fire up again; when the firing process is complete, the Darkness spontaneously ends, Light is pure, and the Real Human shows its form."

Now the question arose, "How can the form of the dark spirit be caused to shatter?"

The old man said, "Forget the body, empty the mind. When nothing arises in open clarity, then you can change the ordinary casing into spiritual casing, change a worldling into a Real Human. Then the task is done."

Someone else asked, "After there is a body outside the body, what work does one do?"

"Good question," said the old man. "There are two paths," he explained, "that of lesser people who leave the body and go, and that of greater people who go with the whole body. The task is quick for the former, slow for the latter.

"After the light spirit has emerged, through the top of the head, it roams blissfully in space, flying a thousand miles in a moment, climbing up to the clouds, looking down upon mountains and seas, transforming in myriad ways, however the heart desires; when it turns around and looks at the illusory body—the ordinary physical body—it looks like a pile of filth, best to leave behind. So some people shed their bones on wild crags, leave their bodies on distant journeys; this is done by those who leave the body and go.

"If people of determination do not seek quick results and are willing to do slow work, not projecting the light spirit just because they can, not abandoning the illusory body just because they can, guarding the original awareness, refining it countless times, forgetting the spirit, like vast space, using a slow fire to cook it, transforming along with it, the physical body will atomize; this is what is done by those who go with the whole body."

According to the record of sayings of the Master of the Void, someone asked, "The emergence of the light spirit is not necessarily in the form of a body outside the body; that has been made clear. But if there is after all no visible form, how can it be called emergence or projection of the spirit?"

The master said, "The inherent light of awareness is neither being nor nonbeing, both nonbeing and being; whether it conceals or manifests, appearances cannot be always the same. In ancient times Master Liu, the Real Human like the Moon in the Ocean, projected the spirit with a white vapor. The root teacher Wang of West Mountain projected it with a flowering tree. Master Ma, the Real Human of the Cinnabar Sun, projected it with thunder. Immortal Sister Sun the Peerless, the Great Leader, projected it with a fragrant breeze and miraculous vapor. Though in these cases there were perceptible appearances, they were not human bodies.

"Also, Master Lan of the sacred mountain Nanyue, the Professor who Nurtured the Elemental, projected the spirit with a clap of the hands and a great laugh. Master Qiu, the Real Human of the Eternal Spring, said himself that when he projected the spirit, three times it struck through the top of his head, and he looked down upon everything in the world, seeing it all as though it were in the palm of his hand. In these two cases, there were no visible forms, and they were not human bodies either. It is not necessary to insist that projection of the spirit must mean having a body outside the body."

Then someone asked, "Why are there differences?"

The old man answered, "When the time is right for coming out of trance, there happens to be this thought moving, which belongs to the initial impulse of emergence, and in each case the manifestation of the spirit goes along with the thought. So if the thought is not on an emanated body, then there does not necessarily appear to be a body, and if the thought is on an emanated body, there does not necessarily not appear to be a body. My own attitude toward these statements, only speaking in terms of those who attained the Tao and became immortal in the schools of the creative Real Humans like the progenitors and developers of the Complete Reality tradition, is that this is people of a family speaking of family affairs, and such statements are not addressed to cultists or ordinary people, who cannot really use them even if they hear them. Let those who learn of the Tao from the school of our ancestor Master Qiu, the Real Human of Eternal Spring, take heed and thus avoid surprise and doubt when the time comes."

## FLYING

At the right time, just out of the valley,
You rise lightly into the spiritual firmament.
The jade girl rides a blue phoenix,
The gold boy offers a scarlet peach.
One strums a brocade lute amidst the flowers,
One plays jewel pipes under the moon.
One day immortal and mortal are separated,
And you coolly cross the ocean.

## *Commentary by Chen Yingning*

This is what is commonly called flying to heaven in broad daylight. Although there are many references to this in the classics of alchemy, I have not personally found any evidence of this attainment in the twentieth century, so I cannot really talk about it.

# *THE SECRET TEXTS*

## UNEXCELLED TRUE SCRIPTURE OF INNER EXPERIENCES OF JADELIKE PURITY

The Primal Ultimately Real Sacred One produced life and opened up the heavens, used the power of great spiritual capacities and great intelligence to form the world, pair yin and yang, and set forth evolution.

First, in the occult space of the real heaven of great purity, It produced external images to represent internal experiences. It separated the energy of nine to make the color of the wood essence of the east, forming an ideal person of the energy of nine to rule it. In human beings this was the liver and the higher soul.

Next It separated the energy of seven to make the color of the metal essence of the west, forming an ideal person of the energy of seven to rule it. In human beings this was the lungs and the lower soul.

Next It separated the energy of three to make the color of the fire essence of the south, forming an ideal person of the energy of three to rule it. In human beings this was the heart and the spirit.

Next It separated the energy of five to make the color of the water essence of the north, forming an ideal person of the energy of five to rule it. In human beings this was the kidneys and the sexual fluid.

The remaining energies of the four directions, water, fire, metal, and wood, It distributed in the center to make the color of the Yellow Court, forming an ideal person of the energy of one to rule it. In human beings this was the spleen and thought.

The five organs contained consciousness, and together were imbued with the reality of ten. The essences of the reality of ten produced the nine transformations: Together they made the alchemical elixir, separately they made sweet dew, circulating all over, above and below, refining and nourishing the physical body, washing away pollution and keeping purity, dissolving the negative and molding the positive, restoring our great beginning and preserving our great completeness, emerging from the top of the head and entering into the lower abdomen, drawing the dragon to change its course to the realm of the tiger.

Four energies combine to form our perfect reality: The decrepit become vigorous, the senile are rejuvenated, the withered face becomes fresh again, white hair turns dark again, the voice is like a bell ringing. The body is light as a feather, the ordinary skeleton completely transformed, flying up to the highest purity.

If learners in the world establish discipline, maintain stabilization, and produce the light of wisdom, by these three powers they can last forever, treading the movements of energy light and clear, stabilizing transformation so as to transcend to immortality.

The true director of the infinity of the two mysteries of the right and left disseminates our Way among celestials and humans, inducing them to abandon deeds that cause impermanence and enter the subtlety of true unity, neither aging nor dying, peacefully existing forever.

The Primal Revered Real One emanated great light from Its seven openings, illuminating infinite lands, twelve thousand heavens and a hundred billion human worlds, each of which used its own power to scatter scents and shower flowers as offerings. All were delighted, and all came to understand the original mind.

At that time a magical palace of jadelike purity suddenly displayed a jewel moon in the darkness of the sky, its radiant light illuminating the ten inner and outer spaces. Within the violet atmosphere in the jewel moon there was a child sitting on a flower dais, with a mouth radiating golden light and giving forth great pure sound speaking these verses:

One mind produces right concentration,
Myriad forms are spontaneously arrayed,
Five energies are distributed through the quarters.
The five energies are pregnant with one spirit,
The one spirit pervades transformation,

Crystallizing and refining the original reality.
The original reality is not something with form:
It is neither existent nor nonexistent.
If people can penetrate this principle,
Then they'll understand the pearl that unifies sense experience.

As the jade child in the moonlight in the dark sky expounded the teaching, it was heard simultaneously by everyone in the heavens and on earth; everywhere the oceans of wisdom were profoundly calm, the mountains of karma crumbled. They turned their gaze around to illumine within, forever to accord with the reality of the Tao. Gazing toward the holy light, they bowed and left, respectfully believing and upholding the teaching.

## *Notes*

This text is fairly typical of a certain type of Taoist health lore, wherein specific inner visualizations are used to kindle the body with awareness and promote a conscious flow of energy. To some extent the mechanism of such exercises has been rediscovered in modern body awareness and therapeutic visualization techniques.

The association of numbers with specific energies is a common Taoist device, the locus classicus being the *I Ching*. In the present text, the numbers used—1, 3, 5, 7, 9—are all associated with the celestial plane, as shown in the ancient "wings" (appendices) of the I Ching. The use of the five elements or five forces—wood, metal, fire, water, and earth—is also common in Taoism. This text does not specifically mention earth, but instead uses the "production number" five, the locus of the center, and the color yellow, all of which are associated with earth.

The association of internal organs with particular energies and functions is characteristic of this level of Taoist healing technique. This text uses the terms higher soul, lower soul, spirit, sexuality, and thought, which according to I Ching alchemical lore inwardly correspond to essence, sense, spirit, vitality, and attention. The uniting of these five "elements" is one of the major operations of spiritual alchemy, and the psychosomatic effect of the visualizations, while not considered the highest form of healing or of spiritual practice, nevertheless is a major element of Taoist health lore.

## True Scripture on Inner Nourishment of the Embryonic Basis of Jadelike Purity

The Great Exalted One, the Old Master, visited the court of the High Lord of the Original Beginning, who said to the Great Exalted One:

"When vitality is empty, it flames up; when energy is empty, it runs down: yin and yang operate individually in vitality and spirit, sense and essence do not become husband and wife. Therefore in people of the lower earth the true energy deteriorates day by day, while negativity and falsehood attack day by day, destroying their original life. Vitality and spirit incomplete, people sink into a ghostly existence.

"I have given you the sublime Tao of the embryonic basis—combine the outer mysterious female with the inner mysterious female, use the outer true spirit to augment the inner true energy. Gather the myriad treasures of heaven, nurture the basic vitality of your embryo, causing the spirit to live in the embryo and the energy to cleave to the spirit. The mind-ruler subtly controls the energy, and the breathing is tuned evenly. Then myriad spirits will honor you, and all demons will disappear.

"You should teach the people to first learn to steady the mind. When the mind is steady, energy stays; when energy stays, the spirit is complete, and when the spirit is complete the body is firm. Do this continuously yet with utmost subtlety; use it endlessly, and you will see its effect. The valley spirit, undying, merges with your real source.

"I pity people of the world who are outwardly robbed by alcohol and passion, and inwardly wrapped up in thought and worry. Only coveting name and gain, they wear out vitality and spirit. They are attached to decorated corpses, putting on appearances and charms. Pursuing externals and forgetting the fundamental, they destroy their own spiritual foundations, cause real knowledge and conscious knowledge to become disparate, and alienate their higher and lower souls. Having many children, their bodies gradually deteriorate, turning into coffinfulls of earth. Losing their primal true potential, they are to be pitied.

"You should encourage people of the world to maintain small discipline, whereby to arrive at great discipline; to first learn to stop the mind, in order to enter gradually into nondoing. On the basis of stability, develop clarity; on the basis of clarity, understand the Tao.

"People of the highest quality replace the coarse with the fine, producing a body of light, living in the heaven of purity, with an immeasurable life span. People of middling quality extend their years and stabilize the physical body, repairing the embryonic basis and not allowing unnatural damage. People of lesser quality avoid emotion and desire, make little of name and gain, turn to the true Way and obediently practice the teaching of the sages.

"You should take my words, divide into millions of bodies, and disseminate this teaching, gradually inducing people to give up falsehood and return to truth, get rid of pollution and keep purity, thus to realize the unsurpassed Tao."

At this time the Great Exalted One, the Old Master, reverently obeyed the sacred teaching; he and the Celestial Mother of Violet Light each transformed into countless bodies and liberated sentient beings all over the world.

Before long, twelve thousand celestials in the upper world magically produced countless celestial people in lotus blossoms; each of them rode into the sky, up to the realm of jadelike purity, and spoke these verses to the Real Honored One:

The supreme spiritual father,
Revealing a great expedient,
Has commanded the Great Exalted One
And the Celestial Mother of Violet Light
To produce incarnations in the lower regions
To liberate multitudes of us.

By discipline and concentration
We all attain higher birth,
Gain mentally produced bodies,
And realize the unexcelled Tao.

We magically produce
Millions of bodies,

Eternally celebrating mystic virtues
Forever inexhaustible.

Those magnificent virtues
Cannot be fully comprehended.
We believe in them—
How shall we ever repay?

We promise to make great vows
That last for evermore.
Also to liberate sentient beings—
This intention alone
Is called requiting virtue.

Speaking these verses, the countless celestial people scattered heavenly flowers and precious scents in the air as offerings. Gazing at the Real Honored One from afar, they bowed one hundred times and withdrew.

### *Notes*

The Old Master is Lao-tzu, transmitter of *Tao-te Ching,* the great Taoist classic commonly known in English as *The Way and Its Power.* The transhistorical representation of Lao-tzu is given the title the Great Exalted One, and a large body of Taoist canonical literature is associated with this name. In this scripture he is partners with a woman called Celestial Mother of Violet Light: in Taoist yoga, the color violet is associated with the so-called upper field of elixir—the brain—and is metaphorically associated with the higher reaches of consciousness. The theme of the supernal couple multiplying into countless manifestations is reminiscent of Buddhist Tantra, to which Taoist scriptures of this sort bear considerable resemblance in content, reputed origins, and method of discovery or transmission.

Two important terms used in this text are drawn from Lao-tzu's *Tao-te Ching:* the "Mysterious Female" and the "valley spirit." This text, however, departs from customary usage in its reference to the outer and inner Mysterious Female. The outer Mysterious Female refers to the balanced combination of flexibility and firmness, considered necessary to the achievement of a harmonious personality. The inner Mysterious Female is ordinarily considered identical to the "valley spirit," which stands for open awareness, the image of the "valley" representing openness, the image of the "spirit" representing awareness.

## PRECIOUS TREATISE ON PRESERVATION OF UNITY ON THE GREAT WAY

The Tao is uncontrived, yet there is nothing it does not do.
It can be witnessed by the mind, not known by knowledge.
What is "knowing"? What is "witness"?
Knowledge dismisses knowledge.

(This means that after you know, you should dismiss knowledge, hide your tracks, and conceal your light.)

Witness openly responds.

(This means when you keep empty and open, without contrivance, eventually there is spiritual effect, like an echo responding to a sound.)

Response comes from nowhere.

(This means it is spontaneous.)

Mind then penetrates.

(When the mind is empty, without contrivance, eventually it understands the Tao; understanding the Tao, spirit penetrates.)

Penetrate the One, and all tasks are done.
The One is the root.

(The One is the root of the Tao.)

The task is the door.

(Attaining the basis of the One is the mind seal of the Great Exalted One. This is what is called the task.)

When the task returns to One, the One is ever present.

(This refers to the task of keeping to the One; when the work is done, you return to one energy, whereupon the body and open selflessness naturally are formless and one energy is ever present.)

The presence should not be reified;
provisionally we speak of keeping to it.

(This means that the one energy is ever present, and we should not reify the energy in our own bodies—to speak of preserving the One or keeping to the One is only a provisional expression.)

Keep open selflessness and naturally be eternal.

(This means just preserve open selflessness, and your spirit and body will naturally endure forever with the Tao.)

### *Notes*

This text is also called "The Mind-Mirror of the Mystic Pearl." The format of this text in its canonical form is followed in translation, with a core text interspersed with commentary. It is not clear if the commentary is supposed to be that of Sun Bu-er herself. In any case, the teaching it represents is strongly reminiscent of elementary Chan Buddhism, which figures prominently in the practice of Sun Bu-er's teacher Wang Zhe and the Complete Reality school following him.

# Part Two

# POETRY OF FEMALE REAL PEOPLE: ALCHEMICAL SECRETS OF THE FEMININE TAO

# *WU CAILUAN*

According to Taoist lore, Wu Cailuan was the daughter of Wu Meng, himself a distinguished Taoist adept and civil administrator of the late third and early fourth centuries. She studied at a special center for feminine alchemy, and there attained the Way. Secular writings, however, place her in the ninth century; according to Taoist lore, she was "banished" to the ordinary world in the ninth century, to become the wife of a certain impoverished scholar. She supported her husband financially by selling copies she made of a reference work on poetry. After ten years of doing this, she became somewhat well known in her locality. Later she and her husband moved to another region, and eventually disappeared together into the mountains.

## *POEMS BY WU CAILUAN*

### *1.*

My mind is like a jade jar of ice,
Never invaded by even half a mote of dust.
Though the jade jar be obscured without,
I pay no mind at all—
On the terrace of Immortals,
I climb straight to the highest level.

*Notes*

Here jade and ice are symbols of purity. Dust is a symbol of material sense objects.

### *2.*

Favor and disgrace are meaningless—
What's the use of contending?
Drifting clouds do not obstruct the shining moonlight.

Let the ox and horse be called,
To both I can respond—
But how could I let a speck of dust
Into the city of mind?

*Notes*

Drifting clouds are Confucian metaphors for status and wealth, Buddhist metaphors for delusion. The moonlight symbolizes the clear cool light of enlightened awareness. The ox and horse are the ox-head and horse-face wardens of the underworld that reward good and punish evil.

*3.*

My body lives in the city,
But my essence dwells in the mountains.
The affairs of a puppet play
Are not to be taken too seriously.
When the polar mountain fits into a mustard seed,
All the words in the universe may as well be erased.

*Notes*

It is said that the great recluse lives in the city, while the lesser recluse lives in the mountain, emblematic of the idea that true transcendence does not depend on favorable external conditions. Mundane behaviors are described as affairs of a puppet play insofar as they are controlled by conditioning rather than by autonomous individual decisions. The image of the immense polar mountain fitting in a mustard seed comes from Buddhism, and represents the attainment of mental freedom through experiential realization of universal relativity.

# *FAN YUNQIAO*

Fan Yunqiao was a woman of the third century. Her husband, Liu Gang, was also a Taoist adept. She is reported to have been endowed with great magical powers, surpassing even those of her redoubtable husband. Like Wu Meng, Liu Gang also served as a civil administrator; following classical recommendations, he is said to have kept his occult capacities hidden from public view, but he was well known as an exceptionally benign and talented governor. The couple studied Taoism together, and also reportedly left the world together to "ascend into heaven" at the same time.

## *POEMS BY FAN YUNQIAO*

### *1.*

The image of the creative is firmness,
The virtue of the receptive is flexibility.
Meditation is first sought in stabilization:
With a clear ladleful of the water of the jade pond,
Why should the bright moon
Need the adornments of seven jewels?

*Notes*

The creative and the receptive are the father and mother signs of the classic I Ching, used in Taoism to represent energy and spirit, two main elements of the Way. The jade pond is an allusion to the abode of the Queen Mother of the West, the leading feminine immortal believed to live in the Kunlun mountains, the headquarters of earthly immortals. The bright moon is here again a symbol for pure awareness; the seven jewels, a Buddhist expression, stand for the most splendid of external adornments.

2.

Dragon and tiger, monkey and horse—
They take effort to corral:
Let them fly and leap a little bit,
And their actions obstruct and obscure.
By perfect silence, being as is,
A method truly sublime,
Capture and transform them
Into a heavenly wind.

*Notes*

The dragon and tiger stand for yin and yang, or spirit and energy; the monkey and horse stand for mind and intellect, particularly in the sense of being unruly. "Being as is," a Buddhist expression, refers to silencing mental conversation and facing reality as it is without the superimposition of conceptual constructs. The "heavenly wind" is a crypticism for the I Ching sign of the creative, which is associated with celestial energy and with the sublimated mind.

3.

To nurture essence,
First quiet the mind.
Why bother seeking skill
With thread and needle anymore?
When you lead the iron ox
To go along with you,
Then you reveal the depth
Of boundless wisdom's deeds.

*Notes*

"Seeking skill" was an ancient ritual performed on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, when housewives would pray for skill in domestic handiwork. The "iron ox" is a Buddhist metaphor for immutability or imperturbability.

4.

What's the need to bow and pray
To beg for long life?

Clearly the original spirit
Is thoroughly pure.
Shatter space to become completely free,
And wishing jewels and relics
Are all empty names.

### *Notes*

To "shatter space" is the final step of a traditional progression of Taoist practice: refine vitality into energy, refine energy into spirit, refine spirit into space, shatter space to merge with the Tao. "Wishing jewels" is a Buddhist expression: The wishing jewel, which grants whatever is desired, is a metaphor for the liberated mind. "Relic" is also originally a Buddhist term, but it is used in Taoism with a special meaning, referring to the crystallization of energy and spirit. That these ultimately become empty names means that the process is transcended and there is no more attachment to causes and effects.

### *5.*

In one golden room
Lives a pair of beauties:
Whoever acts at whimsy
Is not sincere at heart.
If you can produce
A sun within the moon,
The black dragon spews forth
The luminous pearl.

### *Notes*

The golden room stands for the human being purified by spiritual alchemy; the pair of beauties refers to yin and yang, spirit and energy, essence and life. The sun within the moon stands for real knowledge within consciousness. The black dragon is a Buddhist term for the occult recesses of the mind within which is hidden the "luminous pearl" of the potential of enlightenment.

### *6.*

Waves of the river of affection
Rise layer upon layer;

When it is intense you sink,
When it is light you rise.
Drumming the oars,
If you can exercise bold determination,
The weak water of the Isle of Immortals
Will not fail to buoy you up.

### *Notes*

The "weak water of the Isle of Immortals" refers to a deep body of water encircling this legendary abode of high Taoist adepts; it is called weak because it is said that nothing with any weight can float on it, so it presents an unsurmountable barrier to those who retain worldly grossness.

# CUI SHAOXUAN

Nothing seems to be known about the background of Immortal Sister Cui Shaoxuan except that she was the youngest daughter of a government officer in northern China.

## POEMS BY CUI SHAOXUAN

### *1.*

The first crescent of the moon
Shows its form like a beauty's brow:
Paired with the light of the sun,
Its clear purity abounds.
If you want to gain productive energy
And congeal the jade broth,
First seek the wax and wane,
Grab the golden wave.

*Notes*

The first crescent of the moon represents the initial emergence of enlightened awareness from the shadow of mundane conditioning; when the moon is "paired with the light of the sun," that means it is full, signifying the complete revelation of awakened consciousness. The "jade broth" is the result of "refinement of essence," which means purification of the self and removal of egotistical desires. The "wax and wane" means the waxing of positive qualities and the waning of negative qualities; the "golden wave" is the purified creative energy of life itself.

### 2.

Where the source of essence is clear,
The foundation of life is firm;
Turn the waterwheel nine times,

And the nine cauldron's complete.
The gold tiger and jade dragon
Meet together and join;
The three flowers offer forth
A little spirit immortal.

*Notes*

The waterwheel is the process of energy circulation, a common Taoist exercise whereby psychic heat is generated in the body and guided by the attention through psychic channels visualized traveling up the spine and down the front of the torso; nine is the number associated with the full development of the positive principle. The "nine cauldron" stands for the firm positive energy symbolized by the creative sign of the I Ching. The "gold tiger" stands for life or energy, the "jade dragon" stands for essence or spirit. The "three flowers" represent the "three jewels" of Taoist practice—vitality, energy, and spirit—which are combined to produce the complete human.

### *3.*

Mind like still water,
I'm naturally at peace.
Always calm yet ever alert,
I make good progress.
Having nurtured the raven to plumpness,
I feed the rabbit so thin:
Spiritual mushrooms pop up
On the blue-green peak.

*Notes*

The "raven" represents the sun, life, energy, real knowledge, the mind of the Tao; the "rabbit" represents the moon, essence, spirit, conscious knowledge, the human mind. Certain mushrooms are traditionally eaten to foster health and prolong life; "spiritual mushrooms" stand for spiritual immortality.

### *4.*

You should know there is also
A heaven in the earth;

To seek it singlemindedly
Is to seek immortality.
One day when you thoroughly understand
The meaning of yin and yang,
You find it is only before
The energy of generation.

*Notes*

"Heaven in the earth" stands for enlightenment while in the midst of the world, real knowledge within conscious knowledge, the mind of the Tao within the human mind. "Before the energy of generation" alludes to an esoteric exercise similar to the Chan practice of "turning around the light and looking inward" to see "your original face before you were born."

5.

Dark hair and ruddy face—
How long do they last?
In a moment the gray hairs
Are strewn about like thread.
Opening the blinds, I glimpse
The bloom of the apricot blossom:
Here is the scenery of spring—
Don't allow delay.

*Notes*

Some Taoist immortalists sought physical effects, others sought metaphysical effects, still others sought both; in all cases their quests were based on a realization of the frailty and impermanence of ordinary existence. The apricot (often mistranslated as plum) blooms in the cold of the early spring of the lunar calendar, and hence is commonly used in Zen Buddhism as well as in Taoism to symbolize awakening to complete consciousness after the "death" (represented by winter) of limiting mental habits.

6.

I don't seek supporters,
And do not study Chan—
The world's changes in my eyes

I let go on as they may.
The alchemical path, you should know,
Goes directly upward—
The mystic jewel
Is only in our hearts.

### *Notes*

This verse echoes a theme commonly found in Chan Buddhist works, that enlightenment is found within oneself and cannot be "obtained" by external seeking.

# *TANG GUANGZHEN*

Tang Guangzhen was a woman of the Song dynasty (960–1278 C.E.). She was afflicted with a female disorder that healed when she dreamed a Taoist adept gave her some medicine. Directly after her recovery she left her husband and went to study with a certain Taoist Immortal Sister. In the late 1100's she met three Immortals whom she followed on journeys to famous mountains. They asked her if she wanted to transcend the ordinary world and take her place among the saints, or if she wanted to remain in the world, or if she wanted to "abandon her bones and become an Immortal." She replied that her mother was still alive, and she wanted to take care of her in her old age. The Immortals told her that she should in that case remain in the world for the time being. They gave her a tiny pill, after ingesting which she no longer ate grain. Later she was invited to live in a Taoist cloister, and given the title True Immortal with a Spirit Solidified by Serene Tranquillity.

## *POEMS BY TANG GUANGZHEN*

### *1.*

Though the mystic mechanism is right before us,
We need to look for it;
Only when you set eyes on it do you know
The depths of the ultimate design.
The study of essence
Can hardly be directed by words;
When the conditions of karma are wrapped up,
You see the real true mind.

*Notes*

There are many references in Buddhist literature to the paradox that enlightenment is within us yet lies undiscovered "like gold in the earth" as long as we do not make the effort to bring it out. In Taoist terms, following the I Ching, it is said that "people use it every day but do not know it." To "wrap up the conditions of karma," another expression borrowed from Buddhism, means to clear the mind of the refuse of habit in order to recover its pristine pure energy.

*2.*

If you don't know essence and don't know life,
You split the creative and receptive into two paths.
But the day you join them together to form the elixir,
You fall drunken into the jug yet have no need of support.

*Notes*

Drunkenness is a metaphor for enlightenment common to both Zen Buddhism and Taoism. The Taoist classic *Liezi* says, "A drunken man who falls from a cart may be hurt but does not die; he is not aware of either riding or falling, the upsets of death and life do not penetrate his heart. If one can attain such wholeness by wine, how much the more so by Nature! Sages hide in Nature, so nothing can injure them."

*3.*

When you have neither anger nor joy,
Your energy is harmonious;
Responding to events, according to situations,
Wind follows the clouds.
The tiger subdued, the dragon tamed,
Mind is naturally quiet;
The bright moon in the azure sky
Is white as white can be.

*Notes*

Wind is associated with the "tiger," or energy, while "clouds" are associated with the "dragon," or spirit. When "wind chases the clouds," this means that the firm strength of energy acts in accord with the flexible receptivity of spirit.

# ZHOU XUANJING

Zhou Xuanjing and her son Wang Chuyi were both disciples of the eminent twelfth century adept Wang Zhe, founder of the northern branch of the Complete Reality school of Taoism. On the eve of her son's birth, she dreamed that she was surrounded by a scarlet mist, a characteristic auspicious sign. Her curiosity about extraordinary facets of human existence was further stimulated when her son, seven years old at the time, fell into a deathlike coma and subsequently revived to report to his startled mother that he thought he had just been sound asleep. He became a disciple of the great Wang Zhe at the age of twenty, and she also took up Taoist study with the same teacher. Both subsequently became adepts; the son was summoned to instruct two emperors, and the mother was given the title Free Human of Mystic Peace.

## POEMS BY ZHOU XUANJING

### *1.*

The secret of the receptive
Must be sought in stillness;
Within stillness there remains
The potential for action.
If you force empty sitting,
Holding dead images in mind,
The tiger runs, the dragon flies—
How can the elixir be given?

*Notes*

The receptive is the mother sign of the I Ching, associated with the practice of stilling compulsive mentation and said to be the beginning of the practice of the Way. The last part of this verse emphasizes the point made time and again in Taoist meditation texts, that the practice of stillness does not mean quietism, but is a technique for clearing the mind so as to release positive energy from the prison of mental habits.

*2.*

The pedestal of awareness
Is steady as a boulder—
Let others flourish or fall,
In a thousand different states.
The yang light originally
Is the wish-fulfilling jewel;
Here you take it in
To crystallize the great restorative.

*Notes*

The first part of the verse refers to the practice of inward aloofness, whereby one becomes immune to emotional disturbance caused by the ups and downs of circumstances. The last part refers to the primal creative energy of mind, the "yang light," which is the power of the "restorative elixir" that rejuvenates and renews the original consciousness.

*3.*

My mind is like the autumn
In the heartland of Chan;
I earnestly sit in mental work
From midnight and noon.
Fish and dragons are lively,
While the waves are still—
There is just the moonlight remaining
In the eternal sky.

*Notes*

Autumn, when leaves fall from the trees, is a classic Chan Buddhist metaphor for riddance of mental clutter. Midnight and noon are common Taoist symbols for key points in meditation: Midnight is the point of utter stillness and silence followed by the gradual dawning of new awareness; noon is the point where full awakening is consummated and begins to reintegrate with the ordinary world. Fish and dragons are the ordinary and extraordinary faculties in the mind; the stillness of the waves refers to emotional detachment from the vicissitudes of events. The "eternal sky" represents the openness cultivated by Taoists to allow the "moonlight" of the original mind to shine clearly.

### *4.*

Light smoke and thin mist
Block the empty sky,
Leaving the spiritual brightness
No place to abide.
Hate and love, prosperity and decline,
Are all sharp swords;
I am like a despoiled virgin—
How can you look for me?

*Notes*

Smoke and mist refer to worldly concerns. This verse, using a common device whereby the author pretends to talk about herself but is really provoking self-reflection in her readers, is about the vanity of seeking the Tao through the ordinary personality and emotions. The "despoiled virgin" is the Tao sought by greed and aggression.

### *5.*

Essence and life must first be studied
In the moon cave;
Capture the dragon, bind the tiger,
Do not delay.
If yang leaks out during its development,
How can the granule be preserved whole?

*Notes*

The "moon cave" is a technical term relating to the practice of the "waterwheel" or energy circulation exercise mentioned in Cui Shaoxuan's second poem (page 75). In this exercise, psychic heat, called "yang" energy, is brought up through a channel visualized as rising up the spine, drawn through the head, and then allowed to flow down the front of the body. This exercise is used for matters of healing and health. The "moon cave" stands for the shift from the active phase, where the energy is made to rise to the head, to the passive phase, where the energy descends into the abdomen. The active phase is called the yang fire, the passive phase is called the yin convergence; the rising yang fire is visualized as a tiger, while the descending yin convergence is visualized as a dragon. Strict control is exercised to take full advantage of the flow of energy and prevent it from "leaking" away through inattention. The "granule" is the "crystallization" of the combination of energy and attention effected by this exercise.

# SUN BU-ER

In addition to her most famous set of fourteen verses and the secret writings she transmitted, Sun Bu-er also composed a number of poems on inner alchemy for women.

## POEMS BY SUN BU-ER

### *1.*

A springlike autumn's balmy breeze reaches afar,
The sun shines on the house of a recluse
South of the river;
They encourage the December apricots
To burst first into bloom:
A simplehearted person
Faces the simplehearted flowers.

### *Notes*

In Chinese, autumn's Indian summer is called "little spring." The idea of warmth within coolness conveys the sense of the access of energy emerging as a result of detachment from mundane affairs. The term here translated as "recluse" could be translated as "chaste intellectual," and does not mean a recluse in the sense of one who hides from the world; literally it means a cultured and educated person who does not work in the government bureaucracy. Many Taoist adepts were such "recluses" or "chaste intellectuals," who were formally qualified for civil service but were "conscientious objectors" to government corruption. "South of the river," also mentioned in Chan Buddhist literature, alludes to the homeland of many such people; the "sun shining on the house" symbolizes the celestial influence or enlightened awareness affecting them. The "December apricots," mentioned earlier, in the fifth poem of Cui Shaoxuan (page 77), similarly stand for the awakening of new consciousness from the wintry "cold" of transcendence beyond mundane attachments. The "simple heart" or "plain mind" is a typical Taoist term for the innocence of the pristine mind and the experience of reality unadorned by subjective illusions.

*2.*

The beginning of the sustenance of life
Is all in yin and yang.
The limitless can open up
The light of the great limit.
Diligently polished, the mirror of mind
Is bright as the moon;
The universe in a grain
May rise, or it may hide.

*Notes*

The limitless, a term taken from I Ching metaphysics, stands for the absolute infinite that underlies the universe, and for the meditative experience of wholeness before the dichotomization of subject and object; the great limit, likewise a standard term from I Ching metaphysics, is the so-called One or primal unity from which the polarity of yin and yang emerges. The classic expression is that "the great limit is limitless." The "universe in a grain" symbolizes the enormous potential hidden in the recondite secret of the mind; to say it may rise or hide means that the Taoist adept learns to master this potential so as to be able to act or refrain from action at will.

*3.*

Spirit and energy should be clear as night air;
In the soundless is the ultimate pleasure all along.
Where there's reality in illusion
Is illusion in reality,
For the while playing with magical birth
In the silver bowl.

### *Notes*

"Night air" is used literally, and it is also a metaphor for quiet meditation taken from the ancient Confucian philosopher Mencius. "The soundless" is part of a Taoist metaphor for the limitless mentioned in the preceding verse. Reality in illusion means the inner reality underlying surface appearances; illusion in reality means the real nature of illusion, as a creation of the mind. Magical birth refers to the deliberate creativity of the adept who has mastered the energy of life; the "silver bowl," a Chan Buddhist term, is the pure mind that is able to create at will without entertaining illusions about the real nature of action.

### *4.*

You need companions to travel
To the Isle of Immortals—
It is hard to climb
The azure cliffs alone.
If you take dead stillness for refinement,
The weak water brimming
Will lack a convenient boat.

### *Notes*

The importance of the right human associations is strongly emphasized by both Taoist and Buddhist adepts, for without this support it is easy for the lone practitioner to drift unawares into aberrant mental states. This verse brings up one of the most commonly encountered dead ends, mentioned also in an earlier poem, that of quietism. Another earlier verse referred to the "weak water" surrounding the Isle of Immortals, which nothing gross can cross; this verse also makes it clear that quietism also is powerless to bring the practitioner across this boundary.

### *5.*

Nurture the spirit, be sparing with energy,
As though holding a full bowl.
Joy casts down yang,
Anger damages yin.
The two eyes inwardly clear

Tame the tiger by the tail;
The two ears in darkness
Listen in on the Yellow Court.

*Notes*

"As though holding a full bowl" depicts the minute attention exercised by Taoist practitioners to avoid wasting mental and physical energy by unnecessary thoughts, words, or actions. The inward clarity of the eyes alludes to the "inner gazing" exercise by which Taoists realize the essence of mind and thus harness its energy. Darkness is also a common metaphor for disengagement of the senses from the world. The Yellow Court stands for the center, which in Taoist yoga often means the center of the body, but also means the metaphysical center of equipoise, the state of mind before emotions and feelings emerge.

### *6.*

Brambles should be cut away,
Removing even the sprouts.
Within essence there naturally blooms
A beautiful lotus blossom.
One day there will suddenly appear
An image of light;
When you know that,
You yourself are it.

*Notes*

Brambles are a common Chan Buddhist metaphor for entanglements, compulsive emotional reactions to events. The lotus blossom is also a classic Buddhist metaphor for the pure mind that is in the world yet not of the world, just as the lotus is in the water yet no water clings to its flower.

# Part Three

# SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY FOR WOMEN

# INTRODUCTION

This short treatise on Taoist meditation for women was written for one Cao Zhenjie, a married woman described as "more learned and knowledgeable than men," in the year 1899.

The distinction made between men and women in ordinary Taoist practice is part of the science of life and has to do with the physiological difference between the sexes. As seen in the work of Sun Bu-er, the feminine Tao of life includes the practice of deliberate and harmonious menopause as part of mastery over the physical body.

In the present treatise, it will be seen that the primary distinction made is in the location of the attention when generating psychosomatic energy to circulate through the body. Men ordinarily use the lower abdomen, but this is proscribed for women, who are to use the sternum instead.

The inner circulation of psychosomatic energy is commonly used for health and well-being, but misapplication of the collection procedure is universally held to be harmful.

Those familiar with present-day Zen cults of Japanese origin will immediately notice in the following text the distinction made between Taoist practice for females and males in terms of the location of the attention in beginning sitting meditation.

One of the unfortunate results of the uncritical importation of deteriorated forms of Japanese Zen Buddhism into Western countries, where a relatively large number of women attempt to practice Zen, is that many women have been taught to sit with the attention in the lower abdomen, a method Taoists claim is harmful to females.

It is in fact nearly impossible to find any indication of this practice in authentic traditional Chan or Zen texts of China or Japan. It was popularized by the famous eighteenth-century Zen teacher

Hakuin, but as part of a therapeutic regimen, as it had been in the comprehensive Chinese school of Tiantai Buddhism from which Chan partly derived.

There is no evidence, furthermore, of Hakuin having taught any of his many female students to keep their attention in the abdomen as a regular practice, but many later Zen teachers seem to have made it a standard procedure for everyone regardless of other conditions.

Perhaps this distortion was fostered by the popularity of Zen among males of the samurai caste, and later by association of Zen with martial arts, in which the focus of attention in the lower abdomen has a special function.

In martial arts, of course, the motion of the practitioner has the effect of rapidly redistributing the accumulation of energy and thus offsetting the attendant dangers of this technique. According to the Taoist science of life, focus of attention on any part of the body involves potential danger and should not be done too long or too intensely. Specific dangers accompany attention on the lower abdomen in females, and attention on points in the head in both females and males.

In Japan, the deterioration of the original system of which concentration on certain physical locations forms a part is evidenced in the use of the term *tanden* ("elixir field") exclusively for the lower abdomen. The original Taoist system defines three elixir fields, not just one; the lower abdomen is but one of these, called in Taoism the lower elixir field. Again, it might be theorized that the fragmentation and oversimplification of this system in Japan might have been due to centuries of dominance of male military associations with Zen.

The present treatise on spiritual alchemy for women also makes it clear that this type of exercise is done only in the beginning of practice, until a certain effect is realized. Here again Zen cults of Japanese derivation that have people repeat the same exercise—particularly the exercises of placing the attention in the abdomen or on the breath—over and over again for years on end present clear evidence of stultifying deterioration.

The etiology and specific symptoms of the deleterious effects of such practices among modern devotees of Zen or Taoist sitting and similar disciplines are not necessarily self-evident to either prescribers or practitioners, because of the very limitations of the systems that prescribe these practices indiscriminately. In view of this, and in consideration of the benefits of less obsessive and more technically well-informed procedures, this text on feminine Taoist practice may be considered of special importance for the many women of today who are attempting to use interior meditation methods to enhance consciousness and life.

# SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY FOR WOMEN

In the science of essence and life, men and women are the same—there is no discrimination. In sum, what is important is perfect sincerity and profound singlemindedness. An ancient document says, "Only perfect sincerity in the world is capable of ruling." A classic says, "The perfection of singlemindedness is that whereby one may heed the order of life."

In general, what is most essential at the beginning of this study is self-refinement. Self-refinement is a matter of mind and breathing resting on each other. This means that the mind rests on the breathing and the breathing rests on the mind.

What is most important in this is harmony. Harmony is in balance, balance is in harmony. Are they one or two? The union of balance and harmony is called the go-between.

With the harmonious attunement of the go-between, there is natural mutual love between mind and breathing; there is mutual attraction, mutual inspiration, mutual expiration. Continuing uninterrupted, do not forget, yet do not force.

Lao-tzu said, "The singleminded energy is most supple, able to be like an infant." This is the perfection of true harmony.

The Master of the Jade Moon, a spiritual alchemist, said, "When husband and wife meet in old age, their feelings are naturally affectionate."

A classic says, "Tie them into one whole, mix them in one place, make them into one piece, force them in one furnace."

The same classic also says, "Cow and bull go along with each other, sun and moon are in the same place; positive and negative charges merge, metal and fire commingle."

The reality behind all of these sayings is spirit and energy being together, which means mind and breathing being together.

Spirit is essence, energy is life. This is what is meant by the classic saying, "The root of essence is rooted in mind; the stem of life stems from breathing."

It is necessary to know that creative evolution only takes place when spirit and energy are joined into one. The joining of the two into one is the reversion of the two modes—yin and yang—back into one totality.

This is called the twin cultivation of essence and life.

The twin cultivation of essence and life is a matter of keeping the mind and breathing together, not letting them separate even for a moment.

Therefore an ancient alchemist said that "firing the medicine to produce the elixir" means driving energy by spirit, thereby attaining the Tao.

In daily practice it is essential to embrace the breathing steadily with the mind and embrace the mind steadily with the breathing. When you have done this for a time, once you reach even balance you naturally become very stable and concentrated. You plunge into a profound trance where there is no sky and no earth, where you forget about everything, including your own body.

This stage is the experience referred to by the classic saying, "Knowing the white, keep the black, and illumination of spirit will come of itself." You seem to feel body and mind revitalized and supple, with unusual buoyancy and well being.

One alchemist said that in this state you are like someone without the power of speech eating honey, unable to tell of its sweetness.

Another alchemist said, "Almost imperceptible, the first transformation of yin and yang—heaven and earth, full of living energy, suddenly revolve. Therein is a bit of fine scenery—how can this work be put into words?"

This time is what is known as "the one primordial energy coming from the void of space."

As one alchemist said, "The winter solstice is midnight, where you find the celestial mind has no change, where creative energy first stirs, before myriad things are born."

This is what is referred to in alchemical texts as Living Midnight.

One alchemist said of this, "Gather energy quickly when winter comes."

Another said, "Gathering means gathering without trying to gather, which means splitting open the primordial indefinite."

This "splitting open the primordial indefinite" refers to the time of ultimate emptiness and perfect quietude. To empty oneself to the ultimate extent and preserve quietude to perfection is known as returning to *Earth*, the spiritually receptive mode.

*Earth* the receptive is associated with the southwest: It is known as "the region where the medicine is produced," "the land of primordial nondifferentiation," and "the opening of the Mysterious Female."

An alchemist called Seeker of the Fundamental said, "If you want to look for the primordial seed of realization, you must seek out undifferentiated wholeness to set up the foundation."

*Understanding Reality*, the classic of spiritual alchemy, says, "If you want to attain the immortality of the open spirit, you must set the foundation on the Mysterious Female. Once the foundation is set up, the open spirit does not die. Then how can the person die?"

The aforementioned self-refinement, setting up the foundation, and gathering the great primal medicine, are all the same for men and women. Therefore it is said, "The great Way does not make a distinction between men and women; yin and yang, in their various combinations, are all the same." After this I'll talk more about temporal difference.

In his *Secret of Feminine Alchemy*, Liu I-ming says, "There is a true secret about starting practice. The operation is as different for men and women as sky from sea. The principle for men is refinement of energy, the expedient for women is refinement of the body."

Men begin practice with the attention in the lower abdomen, just below the navel. Women start work with the attention between the breasts.

Immortal Sister Zhang, one of the great Taoist women, was initiated long ago by Lu Yan, one of the ancestors of spiritual alchemy. Lu told her, "After midnight and before noon, settle the breathing and sit. As the energy passes through the midspine and on through the brain, gaining the power of energy, contemplate the self."

Lu also said, "You must find the ancestor of your own house. Thunder in the earth rumbles, setting in motion rain on the mountain. Wait until washing, and the yellow sprouts emerge from earth. Grab the golden essence of vitality and lock it up tightly. Fire metal and wood to produce the dragon and tiger."

In general, it is necessary to refine oneself thoroughly before one will have autonomy. Also one must take the positive energy of heaven and earth day after day, and concentrate to clear the mind hour after hour, before the effects of the practice will be experienced. It may take one or two months, or perhaps three or four months. The length of time depends only on the depth of one's work.

While carrying out the work it may happen that women feel there is energy in the opening between the breasts that thrusts out, divides and goes into the breasts, right through to the nipples, which then erect. This is what alchemical classics call the living midnight when the medicine is produced.

One alchemist said, "Suddenly at midnight there is a peal of thunder, and ten thousand doors, a thousand gates, open one after another. If you perceive that there is form within nothingness, I will admit you have seen the original human being in person."

When the work reaches this point, the hundred energy channels in the body are in harmony, while their critical apertures, the passes where energy can accumulate, are all opened. In truth, each pulse fills the chest, all is spring.

Now to explain Lu Yan's initiatory statements to Immortal Sister Zhang. "After midnight and before noon" refers to the fact that the midnight hour is best for finding reality. People who practice quiet sitting usually do it late at night or early in the morning.

To "settle the breathing" means to tune the breath so that it is even. In "sitting," two people sit with unified attention placed between them. With mutual concentration, pure attention is embraced. With pure attention in the center, a unified energy flows, thus pressing tightly on the midspine, and going on through the brain.

This is what is referred to as the reversal of the Yellow River, meaning the opening of the spinal energy channel.

"Gaining energy, contemplate the self." The "self" here is a metaphor for pure positive energy, and the self has been refined into an incorruptible immortal of absolute unity. This is what alchemical classics refer to as absolute unity containing true energy.

"Find the ancestor of your own house" means seeking out the very beginning of the living body receiving energy, finding the primordial point of original generative energy.

"Thunder in the earth rumbles, setting in motion rain on the mountain." This is the same as the saying, "The white clouds pay court to the palace on high, ambrosia pours on the polar mountain."

"Wait until washing, and the yellow sprouts emerge from earth." Waiting means waiting for the right time, washing means washing the mind and refining oneself. This is what is meant by the alchemical term "perfumed steaming." As for "yellow sprouts," yellow is the color of earth, sprouts are the life potential. Emerging from earth means that the experience is like when myriad things grow in spring, and the whole earth is renewed.

At this time the positive energy goes all the way to heaven, in the form of a fiercely blazing fire, resembling flaming wind. Quickly gather it up and send it into the central chamber, in the center of the torso. This is why Lu Yan said, "Grab the golden essence and lock it up tightly."

Another alchemist said, "Hold the golden essence fast, draw it carefully on, send it into the field of elixir."

As for "Fire metal and wood to produce the dragon and tiger," this refers to the perfection of the sense and essence of consciousness, the first sprouting of the Tao.

To sum up, it is just a matter of having people draw their attention to the inner sense of the real mind, carrying the work through the natural cycle. The dragon and tiger mean the ascent and descent of bipolar energy.

If you work diligently, as one alchemist said, "When that one point of energy returns of itself and sinks into the body, it turns into year-round spring. A bit of white cloud brings a waft of fragrance; each time the rain passes, all is refreshed. Unconscious like a drunkard all day long, free and at ease, just keep 'the spring within the hollow.' When the essence of negativitity throughout the body has been stripped away, it turns into a mass of pure positive gold."

The work after this is the same for women as for men. Overall, in the secrets of the spiritual alchemy for women, these words alone should be the quickest route. Lu Yan did not hoard his celestial treasure, but divulged it all at once. It is a pity that people do not recognize it.

Yet it should be realized that expressions such as "below the navel" and "between the breasts" are both representational. Do not look for them as having physical form.

A classic says, "Clinging to this body is not the Way. Shunning this body is also wrong."

It is also said, "The whole body, inside and out, is all dark."

It is also said, "Looking right before your eyes, you don't recognize the real, much less what is important therein."

The developmental process is subtle and necessitates personal transmission and mental reception from a true teacher. Only when you have understood it do you have a place to start.

An alchemist said, "How can the personal transmission be explained on paper? Do not mislead yourself by blind guesswork."